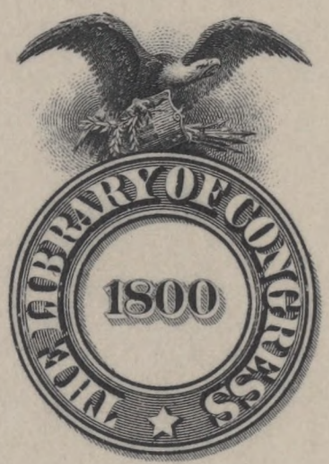
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AUTHOR OF "INFLUENCES"



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TO

MY COUSIN MABEL

BILLY

CHAPTER I

"AND I love you," he stammered.

"That," said Billy with decision, "I do not believe."

Jerry Aynesworth rose from his chair awkwardly—he had been sitting on the edge of it. He was a sandy-haired, round-faced, young man with an anæmic moustache, and he wore spectacles. The girl watched him with an amused smile.

"I suppose I oughtn't to have said that," she said. "I suppose I ought to have appeared deeply moved, and offered to be a sister to you."

"I'm already provided with a sister."

"I know, and she is exceedingly anxious that you should marry me. Really, your deference to her wishes reflects tremendous credit upon you—as a brother."

"I say, you know, you needn't chaff a fellow like that. You won't have me, and you've said so, and I suppose that's the end of it, and—— "

"And we needn't sit out the rest of this dance? But why not? I'm enjoying myself immensely in your company, and I shall think you're awfully rude if you don't say that you're doing the same in mine."

"Well, Miss Holroyd—— "

"Oh, call me Billy. Every one calls me Billy—that is to say, every one I like."

"Then you do—— "

"Of course I do. Otherwise I shouldn't have come to this out of the way part of the house with you. I should think this old room must have seen some love-making in its time—real love-making, I mean."

"It has. That's why I brought you here. We always propose in this room."

"We? "

"The family in general."

"Really! Is it also a family custom to invite the intended victim for a visit, give a dance, drag her up to a lonely turret and offer her the alternative of marriage or being cast over the battlements? "

"You must admit that I haven't suggested that alternative."

Billy laughed.

"No," she said, "I'm disappointed; I don't feel that I've had my money's worth."

She rose to her feet with the lazy movement of a strong young animal, crossed to the window and looked out. The dried-up moat at the base of the tower would have provided an uncomfortable resting-place for any one who should be thrown from the turret window, and in days gone by had doubtless proved so. A glance at Billy and her companion was, however, enough to show that if it came to a question of throwing it would be Jerry who would find himself in the moat. Billy was very near being a physically perfect specimen of the sex which is conventionally labelled "weak." She was immensely strong for a

girl, and tall into the bargain, and, though she displayed that essential awkwardness which comes from length of limb, she was endowed with the natural grace which results from responsive and well-balanced muscles. She was big but not clumsy, straight but not angular, with the face of a pretty girl, and the figure of a handsome boy. Perhaps her chief charm consisted in her complete unconsciousness of it—an unusual trait, but a perfectly natural one in her case, for she experienced too great an enjoyment in living to bother herself about anything else. She dressed herself nicely, because clothes which fit the body and do not offend the eye are comfortable and garments otherwise constituted are not. She was cheerful because she was healthy, amiable because she usually got what she wanted, probably a bit selfish, and apparently entirely sexless.

Jerry was apparently a bit sexless too. If the glory of a man is his strength, it was clear that he would never find his salvation in that direction. Diminutive in stature and feeble of body, one's first impression of him certainly was that Nature had made a mess of him as a man; but, an examination of his plain little face out of which peered round, be-spectacled, blue eyes in an apparently perpetual state of astonishment, convincingly proved that She would have made a still greater mess of him as a woman. His qualities were chiefly negative—he didn't bite, didn't play games, didn't gamble, didn't flirt, didn't do anything objectionable—or otherwise. He was going to be Lord Sutcliffe some day, had rather a nice tenor voice, and an ear for music. Those were his only affirmative attributes.

Presently Billy turned to him.

"So you always propose here, do you?" she said. "If it's not a rude question, how many times have you done so already?"

"Oh, I—why, never before. This is my maiden effort."

"I being the maiden."

"Exactly. You can't think what a fearful effort I had to make in order to screw my courage up to the point. I couldn't eat any dinner, and I've been avoiding you ever since."

"Well, aren't you relieved now?" Her tone was cordial and friendly, the former chaff had died out of it.

He turned to her gratefully.

"Do you know, in a sense I think I am. As a matter of fact, I—— "

"Didn't want to propose to me at all."

"Not exactly that."

"Well, didn't want to propose to any one at all."

"That's more like it. I say, what a wonderful girl you are to have guessed that; you read me like a book."

"No, but I think I understand. You see, I'm not like most girls; they're keen on marriage, I'm not. I prefer golf and tennis."

"Don't you want to marry?"

"Not a bit—at least, not like other people. I want to be perfectly free and independent, and able to do what I like. Of course, the worst of being a girl is that one can't—I ought to have been born a boy."

"You'd have made a splendid boy."

"Well, I like golf, I'm never ill, if people swear I don't blush, and if they smoke I don't cough."

"You don't swear or smoke yourself?"

"No; but I should if I wanted to."

"Well, may I smoke?"

"Of course."

Jerry lit a cigarette and inhaled it thoughtfully.

"Blanche will be awfully annoyed when she hears you've chucked me," he said; "she'll be furious."

"My dear man, it's better to be made uncomfortable for half an hour by your sister than for the rest of your existence by your wife. If I was a man I should never marry."

"But I have to think of the family tree."

"Oh, I should let the family tree go hang. Marriage, in my opinion, is on a wrong basis altogether; two people are tied together for the avowed purpose of devoting themselves to each other for the rest of their lives, whereas they would get along very comfortably indeed if they devoted themselves—to themselves."

"In other words, minded their own business?"

"Quite. In fact, that is an ideal marriage—two people completely independent of each other's control, living in the same house of course, seeing each other every day, being excellent pals, but never interfering with each other's actions."

"And what about family ties?"

"Oh, you must leave them out, of course. They spoil the whole thing. Family ties have a nasty habit of developing into family knots."

"I like your idea awfully—about being pals and nothing more."

"You see the advantage of my system is that

there's no disillusionment; there can't be, because there's nothing to get disillusioned about. Marriage as it exists is founded on a fiction, and the fiction is that you're going to sacrifice yourself for the benefit of the well-beloved. Just wait till the well-beloved gets on a bit in life and wants a set of false teeth and a toupet; then you begin to realize that burnt offerings are a smoky and over-rated form of amusement after all."

"I can't say that the mutual sacrifice theory has ever appealed to me very strongly, but it sounds awfully selfish to say so."

"Not a bit. It's common-sense. Sacrifice means making yourself miserable. Mutual sacrifice means two people making themselves miserable in order that they may make each other happy. Isn't it much better that they should make themselves happy in order that neither of them should be miserable?"

"You ought to start a school for modern matrimonial education."

"It's a good idea, but I'm afraid that I shouldn't get many pupils. You see, nearly every one I've met seems to want a marriage for love—only they don't want to do the loving."

"Most people regard marriage as a kind of conjuring trick."

"Whereas it ought to be a mere business arrangement—a partnership with a distinctly limited liability."

"You know, you're a most surprising person. I've never heard you talk like this before. I feel almost inclined to make a confession to you."

"Please do."

Jerry began to pace the room with short, quick

strides. Billy resumed her seat and watched him. She liked the little man in spite of his eccentric appearance. She would have been puzzled to say why, for they had apparently no interests in common. He was the very antithesis of her, but perhaps that was the reason; he was sufficiently neutral to make an excellent background.

He continued to march up and down the room—a curiously modern, decadent touch in that ancient chamber. He seemed to find a difficulty in beginning what he had to say.

"Go on," said Billy, and her fine teeth gleamed friendly encouragement.

"It sounds awfully rude, I know," he began, "but I really didn't want you to accept me. I had to propose to some one. My people are always worrying me to marry and—to tell you the truth—I felt it would be safer to propose to some one who I was sure wouldn't have me, than to some one who possibly would."

"Oh!" cried Billy; "how splendid! I think that was awfully clever of you. Go on."

"So I proposed, but I didn't want you to accept me, any more than I want any one else to. The very idea of marriage appals me. I want to be let alone, allowed to go about my own business. I collect fossils, you know; that's my hobby, not matrimony."

"I've got a maiden aunt—she's about eighty—I'd better introduce you to her. She'd just about suit you."

"Oh no, as a wife she'd be too old, and as a fossil she'd be much too young. However, as I was saying, I don't want to marry at all. I don't mind proposing

at intervals, to keep the family quiet; that is to say, always providing it's quite safe."

"You seem to have had extraordinary confidence in me."

"Well, I had; but I was a bit nervous, all the same."

"I wish I'd said 'yes.' It would have been lovely to see your face."

"I'm very glad you didn't, for then we shouldn't have had this jolly talk."

"It has been jolly, hasn't it?"

"Rather! I never knew we hit it off so well. It's really rather quaint that I, who don't want to marry any one, should propose to a girl who doesn't want to marry any one either."

"It is a bit, especially as we shall both apparently have to marry somebody some day."

"Why both?"

"Well, you, on account of the family tree you referred to; and I, because it means more freedom."

"I thought you considered marriage slavery."

"Oh, that depends on the man; I shall find something tame one of these days. Meanwhile, we had better go downstairs."

"I suppose we had; we've been up here a deuce of a time. Oh Lord! do you know it's half-past one? We've been here over an hour! What on earth will they think?"

"They'll think we're engaged."

"You mean my sister?"

"And my people."

"Do they know?"

"Don't they? I'm in just as big a mess as you

are. I shall have quite as bad a time as you will; worse, because you can slang your sister, and a girl can't slang her people."

"What shall you say is the reason which kept you up here?"

"Why, that you were trying to throw me over the battlements because I wouldn't marry you as per programme."

Laughing they left the Turret Chamber, as it was called. Billy went first down the steep, winding staircase which led to the habitable regions below. There was only space for one of them to go at a time. She paused at the bottom and waited for her companion. Presently he appeared, strangely excited.

"I say, Billy."

"What is it?"

"I've got a splendid idea; I can't imagine why I didn't think of it before. We've both got the same views about marriage, we've both got to marry somebody some day, there'll be an awful row if we don't marry each other—let's do it in self-defence."

Billy rippled with mirth.

"Marriage isn't a crime—yet," she said.

"But why not do it? Marry, I mean, on a sound business basis and all that sort of thing? We'll draw it up like a state treaty, if you like—'the high contracting parties hereby agree that they will never, never, never world without end mind each other's business, but will strictly attend to their own.'"

"Do you mean it seriously?"

"Rather!"

"No control over each other's actions?"

"Quite so."

"What about—family ties?"

"That's answered by the answer to the previous question, as Cabinet Ministers say."

Billy remained silent for a moment with a look on her face of puzzled amusement. After all, why not? She intended to marry some day, when, in her own words, she had found "something tame." Well, she had found it. Surely? She glanced at her companion with heightened curiosity—yes, Jerry was tame enough in all conscience. Moreover, she liked him. She could hardly expect to find any one else whom she liked and who also filled the bill in all other respects. The impulse to accept him suddenly rose strong in her. Wait and think it over? Why wait? Billy's resolutions were always governed by the circulation of her blood, and were consequently rapid. She was a girl who never thought before she spoke and rarely afterwards. She experienced a momentary hesitation before the gravity of the step she was contemplating, just a flicker of doubt crossed her mind. These affairs were supposed to be governed by a thing called love? Pooh! She banished the thought with the characteristic impatience of her twenty-three years' omniscience. Love was not for her. It was just the very thing she didn't want.

She turned with smiling face to Jerry.

"Right O!" she said; "I'm game."

"That's great!" he replied. "This is marriage on real Free Trade principles—we've always been Free Traders in my family."

"Now let's go and tell our people."

"Certainly—but—oughtn't we to sign, seal and deliver the bargain somehow?"

"How do you suggest doing it?"

"Well, what about a kiss?"

"Oh," laughed Billy, "kissing's barred!"

CHAPTER II

"A marriage has been arranged and will shortly take place between the Honourable Gerald Torrington Aynesworth, only son of Lord Sutcliffe, and Miss Wilhelmina Holroyd, eldest daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Holroyd of 210 *Lancaster Gate."*

JIM STONE laid down the paper and spilt his coffee. He had been going to propose to Billy himself. It has a somewhat annoying and startling effect to read in your morning paper that the lady to whom you have made up your mind to devote the rest of your life has made other arrangements in regard to her destiny. It will excuse your spilling the coffee. It will almost certainly spoil your breakfast. Jim took no further interest in his.

He read the announcement over again. There was no occasion for him to do so, but it is the sort of silly thing one does under the circumstances. Then he got up from the table, upsetting a chair in the process, and leant against the mantelpiece. He filled and lit his pipe, quite mechanically. Then he swore—also mechanically.

It was a very nasty knock for him; for Jim was a simple, sincere, big-hearted young man, and he was deeply in love with Billy. He had known her all his life. They had pretty well grown up together, although

he was some years older than she was. Their attitude towards each other had been that of brother and sister, with all the incidental disadvantages of that relationship left out. She still regarded him in that capacity, but he had come to consider her as something more. He loved her, every inch of her long, lithe, active form, every expression of her dear, bright, boyish face. And now—that was all over, his dream had ended, gone out. So had his pipe. He put it away.

Jim was a square-shouldered young man of rather above middle height, though his sturdy build gave one the impression that he was shorter than he really was. He had a somewhat plain but eminently likeable face, and it required no physiognomist to read honesty and reliability in every line of it. It was always a faithful reflex of the emotions of its owner—Jim was no diplomatist—and, as he put on his hat and left his chambers at Whitehall Court to walk down the Embankment towards the Temple, he presented to the world the countenance of a very depressed individual indeed. Jim was a barrister and the "devil" of a very successful one—to wit, Richard Branksome, a Common Law junior with a large practice. It may perhaps be necessary to explain that a "devil" in the Temple is a different order of being from him to whom the term is usually applied. The Temple "devil" is merely an inoffensive, industrious mortal who works early and late at another man's papers without fee or reward, partly because he hopes that some day he may gather up the crumbs when his chief shall be transferred to some higher sphere of forensic activity, but chiefly because he has none of his own and would otherwise be left to twiddle his thumbs.

Jim had been lucky, as Temple ideas of luck go. He hadn't been left to twiddle his thumbs long. Within a year of his call to the Bar, he had entered Branksome's chambers as a tenant, and, having made himself particularly and unobtrusively useful in the numerous small ways that daily present themselves in a busy barrister's chambers, he soon gained Branksome's confidence, and became his right-hand man. He was popular with the clients, he could keep a case going whilst his chief was engaged in another court, he came to chambers early and left them late, was ready for any job that was going, from noting up a case to doing one, and was, in fact, thoroughly reliable. It is true that he made no money, or, at least, none to speak of, but many a good mine lies dormant for years before it declares a dividend ; and Jim's energy and perseverance were so much capital invested in acquiring an experience of his profession, which to young barristers is always difficult, and in purchasing good-will, which to them is frequently impossible.

It was a beautiful morning in early June. There was a soft breeze blowing off the sluggish river and the sun warmed the air which the smoke of London had not yet had time to pollute. It was Jim's daily custom to take this walk in the morning from his chambers in Whitehall to his chambers in the Temple, and ordinarily he enjoyed it. But to-day the world was wrong. The cheerfulness of nature, which can be as expressive in artificial London as elsewhere, awoke no responsive echo in him. Taxi-cabs panted past, and the London County Council trams jingled along unnoticed by him, and he was only dimly recalled from his abstraction to acknowledge the existence of a decadent hansom by

being nearly run over by it as he crossed over to the Temple Gates.

His chambers were situated in Temple Court—a dingy locality under normal circumstances reminiscent of charwomen and dust, but to-day its dirty windows sparkled with sunlight, and the solitary soot-begrimed tree, which stood in the centre of it, alluringly rustled a petticoat of green leaves with the air of being old enough to know better. But Jim only saw the soot and the dirt. Yesterday, when he had left the Temple, he hadn't seen it. Then everything had looked beautiful, everybody had appeared cheerful; it was, in fact, a lovely, symmetrical world. To-day it was an ugly, oblate spheroidal planet. Yesterday he had heard good news; news so good that it altered his whole environment, opened his eyes to the future, gave him one indeed, for it put him in a position to propose to Billy. To-day——!

This is what had happened. Branksome had been for some time behaving in a restless, eccentric kind of way, quite foreign to his usual habits. Jim had at last become quite anxious about him and suspicious as to whether his chief had recently committed a murder and had found the disposal of the body an inconvenient process, or was about to declare himself unable to meet his creditors. Then Branksome explained. He had been appointed a magistrate. Result, no more devilling for Jim, *but* an excellent opportunity for succeeding to a portion of the great one's practice. Branksome must have been making at least three thousand a year. Now that he was leaving his practice, a good portion of it would in the ordinary course come to Jim, probably at least a third. A thousand a year! What a difference

it would make to the young man who had formerly found it difficult to turn over a couple of hundred! As a bachelor he had dragged along comfortably enough. Three or four hundred a year of his own and a couple of hundred at the Bar had sufficed for his simple tastes. But now—or rather, yesterday—a new prospect appeared, a charming prospect, with Billy in the centre of it. It had only appeared, however, to vanish; it had cheered him yesterday that it might mock him to-day; and the very opportunities of independence it presented served but to accentuate his disappointment.

It was a very nasty dose of physic that Jim had taken, but by the end of the morning he had left off making faces about it. He didn't do much work. But he wasn't idle. He consumed nearly all his available stationery in writing letters of congratulation to Billy, which forthwith found their way into the wastepaper basket. Letters of congratulation under such circumstances are somewhat difficult things to write, and Jim finally gave it up as a bad job. He resolved to call upon Billy the next day instead and express the sentiments he was supposed to feel in person.

Meanwhile, Billy was beginning to find herself a person of some importance in her family circle. She had returned home with her mother two or three days previously, and the *Morning Post* notice had appeared with all convenient dispatch. As her brother Sydney had remarked, it was desirable to obtain an official quotation as speedily as possible—Sydney went every morning to a broker's office where he was supposed to be learning the art of finance. He professed to regard his sister, since her engagement, as a very promising

security. Her father, as a matter of fact, did so—but he didn't say so. Mr. Holroyd was a banker. Her mother purred about the house with soft eyes—a sure sign of satisfaction on her part. She carried the *Morning Post* paragraph about with her, and, it is believed, slept with it under her pillow. Billy's younger sister, Winnie, aged nineteen and romantic, followed her about with wondering, admiring eyes, and positively bubbled with excitement when Billy allowed her to open her letters at breakfast and gasp forth scattered portions of their congratulatory contents.

Billy herself remained calm.

She received hosts of congratulations, for she was universally popular and had plenty of friends, though no intimate ones. Intimate friends are those to whom we entrust secrets, and Billy never had secrets, neither was she capable of keeping one. She had a little bit of a secret now, for she was not disposed to favour the world with the real reasons for her engagement. Consequently the world drew its own conclusions and considered that Billy had done rather a clever thing for herself—and that didn't tend to diminish her popularity.

This reflection somewhat annoyed her. She felt that it was rather hard that she, who had never set her cap at any one, should be credited with having angled deeply and successfully for the heir to a desirable title. Of course people didn't tell her so, but it was obvious from the look on their faces and the tone of their voices what was passing in their minds. Unfortunately she couldn't undeceive them. Moreover, it was a most reasonable misconception, for nobody who knew Billy could possibly imagine that she was

in love with Jerry, except perhaps her mother and Winnie, but relations hardly count.

Billy's characteristic candour inclined her to say to all these friends of hers—" my good people, it's quite true that I'm not going to marry him because I love him, but neither am I going to marry him because he happens to be the son of a peer. It's merely a convenient business arrangement between us which suits us both very well."

She realized, however, that it was a " convenient business arrangement " between herself and Jerry only, and that as regards the rest of the world she must acquiesce in the conventional assumption that her engagement was under the direct supervision of a gentleman of juvenile aspect and improper appearance, armed with a quiverful of arrows and an obviously defective bow.

But Billy didn't in the least regret the step she had taken. The more she reflected upon it the more excellent it seemed. It was really exactly the kind of marriage that she had always wanted. She liked her future husband quite well enough to take her meals with him in passable comfort; she had rather a contempt for him, it is true, but she didn't mind that, and he had rather an admiration for her, but she didn't mind that either. Of course, it was trying to be obliged to listen to the romantic outpourings of Winnie, and her mother's enthusiasm tended somewhat to get upon her nerves; still, it was excusable upon their part, and she only had to submit upon hers; and that wasn't so very difficult after all.

It was not surprising that Billy's engagement should create a stir amongst her friends. She possessed neither

the reputation for being sentimentally inclined nor socially ambitious, but she had fished a coronet out of the Social bran-tub with an apparent aptitude that bespoke long practice. And her friends regarded her as a monument of concealed cunning in consequence. They could hardly be expected to guess that she had merely taken Jerry because he had happened to come along.

As a matter of fact, it was highly desirable that Jerry should marry. Sutcliffe Park would be his some day, and he would certainly never earn enough nor succeed to enough to keep it up properly, so that a wife comfortably supplied with the necessary funds was, from the point of view of Jerry's relations, indispensable. Moreover, Jerry was not brilliant in business matters, so that a modicum of capacity in his wife would be no disadvantage.

The difficulty which had obstructed the schemes of his relations had been Jerry himself. Many girls looked at him with an eye to matrimony, but he utterly declined to reciprocate. His sister, Blanche, took the matter in hand with her usual vigour, but her efforts in the direction of stimulating her brother with thoughts of marriage were about as successful as if she had endeavoured similarly to endow a pudding. She spent her time in bringing eligible young ladies up to the mark, and he spent his in running away from them.

Consequently, although Blanche had at first possessed somewhat lofty ideas of what would constitute a suitable bride for her brother, she had gradually descended the gamut of social possibilities until a family with the position of the Holroyds stood comparatively high in her scale. When she discovered,

moreover, that Billy apparently did not inspire Jerry with thoughts of instant flight, she concentrated her attention upon bringing Mrs. Holroyd to her own way of thinking, a task she found by no means difficult.

Of course, it was all done very tactfully and, to her credit be it said, Mrs. Holroyd possessed quite sufficient *nous* to play second fiddle to the Honourable Blanche and keep in tune ; with the result that Billy's engagement promoted a glow of mutual self-satisfaction in their breasts which might, perhaps, have been lessened had they been aware of exactly how it had been brought about.

So everybody played their parts with admirable discretion—except Jim, who carried out his intention of calling upon Billy to congratulate her, by doing so with a face admirably adapted to a funeral.

CHAPTER III

ONE of the disadvantages of being half of an engaged couple is that during the engagement you can never get away from the other half. This is the world's fault, not yours—and very probably not his or, as the case may be, hers. The world possesses misconceptions on many things, perhaps on most, but it displays its wildest inaccuracy of thought in its notions of the relationship which should exist between engaged persons. It is firmly convinced that inasmuch as they are to be tied together, presumably for life, they ought never to be out of each other's sight, or within other people's, until that operation is performed. In furtherance of this idea the world asks the young people to its houses, invariably sends them into dinner on each other's arms, inveigles them into rooms with "cosy corners" and leaves them alone together, and in fact does everything which lies within its power to make them heartily sick of each other.

All of which means that Billy and Jerry saw a good deal of each other during the London season. The chief instruments by which this was effected were undoubtedly Mrs. Holroyd and Blanche, especially Blanche. It has been incidentally mentioned that Blanche was of a managing disposition. As a matter of fact, she completely controlled her family, consisting of her father and Jerry.

Lord Sutcliffe's subjugation by his daughter was, perhaps, not so very unnatural, for he had formerly been completely subdued by his wife, and, when she died, Blanche had succeeded to the reins of government by the simple expedient of taking them. As for Jerry—well, Blanche had always been five years older and ten years wiser than her brother, and had consistently bullied him into a meek acquiescence in that fact ever since their nursery days.

Not that father and son had much to complain of. Blanche looked after them remarkably well in her own determined fashion. She was an excellent housekeeper, had apparently no intention of marrying and so disturbing the easy current of their lives or her own, and, in fact, was quite a nice person to live with, so long as she got her own way. She invariably did get her own way so far as they were concerned, and they would have been perfectly helpless without her.

Blanche was a handsome woman of somewhat severe type, rather short-sighted, which necessitated her using a lorgnette, and with a passion for order in everything. It was this desire for the fitness of things which made it seem imperative to her that Jerry and Billy should pass as much as possible of their engagement in each other's company. It appeared to her curiously arithmetical mind to be one of the rules of the game, and she would no more have broken it than she would have departed from her system of keeping the household books by double-entry.

Accordingly she came up from Sutcliffe Park with her father, planted him in an hotel, and forthwith proceeded to dig Jerry out of his bachelor quarters and drive him, metaphorically and literally, to dinner

parties—he hated dinner parties—afternoon teas, Ranelagh, Henley, Lord's and, in fact, all the places where people engaged in occupations which he neither enjoyed nor understood.

And Mrs. Holroyd saw that Billy went too. Billy was quite content to go. She was always ready to be amused, and Ranelagh, Henley, and Lord's were perfectly in accordance with her tastes. But she found that she was not expected to devote her attention to polo, rowing, or cricket, but to take an intelligent interest in Jerry. How could any one take an intelligent interest in Jerry?

"I'm not good at sheep's eyes," she said to him, when they had been ostentatiously left alone one Sunday at a week-end party on the river to which they had been invited; "let's go out in a punt."

"I can't punt," yawned Jerry.

"No, but I can, and you can sleep. Then when we come back every one can imagine that we've been whispering love to each other amongst the bulrushes."

So Jerry slept throughout that fine Sunday afternoon whilst Billy shot him along the placid river with powerful thrusts of her fair young arms, and incidentally nearly shot him into it, with the assistance of an overhanging branch on the neighbouring bank, which she was skirting somewhat too finely. However, he only lost his hat.

Billy was accustomed when in London to ride every morning in the Park. She was a good horsewoman, though, like many such, her style was too careless to be considered graceful. But she went to the Row for exercise not artistic effects. She liked riding, and she liked riding fast. Again, however, the hand of Blanche

intervened, for that masterful person dragged Jerry into the Park almost every morning, and Billy found that she was expected to talk to him. This was neither to her taste nor his. She hated lounging along by the rails when she wanted to be kicking the turf up in a smart canter. Moreover, a conversation conducted between a person seated upon a horse and another who isn't must needs be of absorbing interest to be satisfactory to either. When the first wants to be doing something else and the second hasn't got anything to say the result is depressing, to say the least of it.

Billy was quite glad when August put in its appearance and she and her family departed for the seaside. The Holroyds went to the seaside every year; to the same place, Beachaven; to the same house, Sunny Bank; and for the same time, the months of August and September. Billy proceeded to occupy herself with her usual amusements—golf in the morning, then a bathe, more golf after lunch, then sometimes another bathe (this last highly disapproved by Mrs. Holroyd), winding up with the band in the evening at the Dome, where she met all her friends and enjoyed herself immensely. The Holroyd family were quite as much a feature of the little south-country watering-place as the Dome itself—at least during the months of August and September—almost more so, perhaps, for they were there before the Dome was built.

The Dome was originally intended to be a kind of palace by the sea. It was the Beachaven substitute for a pier. There was nothing vulgar about Beachaven, and piers are vulgar; at least, Beachaven thought so. Moreover, piers are expensive things to build; so also

are palaces by the sea. Consequently the Dome never attained the artistic heights aimed at by its designers. It had to be finished off in rather a hurry, as funds ran low, and, in fact, it somewhat resembled an overgrown cowshed, only it was so leaky and draughty that no self-respecting cow with any regard for her constitution would have trusted herself inside it. Still, the original plans, brilliantly coloured and resplendently framed, were hung up inside the principal entrance, Beachavians always called it the principal entrance—there was but one—so that all who were sufficiently interested could see what the Dome might have been and, with a good deal of luck, some day may be.

With all its shortcomings, however, the Dome possessed numerous attractions, at any rate, in the summer. One of these was its little terraced garden which faced the sea, and another was the excellent orchestra which performed in the diminutive band-stand planted in the centre. Here all and sundry resorted in the evening in search of music or conversation, principally the latter.

One of the great features of Beachaven is its row of bathing huts on the beach with their backs against the irregular slab of concrete which Beachavians term the "Front." Two principal characteristics distinguish these huts from any to be found elsewhere. They are exceedingly comfortable and absolutely the ugliest constructions of their kind in existence. Afternoon teas are partaken in them, and a series of informal calls paid by the various occupants, everybody being on the best possible terms with each other and encumbered by the fewest possible clothes. When the youth of Beachaven of both sexes is not engaged in

playing golf, it is either disporting itself in the sea or sprawling about on the beach drying itself in the sun. Consequently one can readily understand that Beachaven doesn't want a pier.

Beachaven just suited Billy. She had lots of friends there, and she liked to see them often. At Beachaven you can't help seeing any one often who happens to be there. On this occasion, too, she was rather glad to get away from London; she had a sense of freedom now that the restraints of Blanche were removed and she was no longer compelled to be perpetually in Jerry's society. The weather also contributed to her content by behaving itself admirably, and Billy golfed, and tennissed, and sailed, and swam, and generally enjoyed herself thoroughly.

It was therefore with more surprise than pleasure that she received a letter from Blanche saying that she was bringing Jerry down to Beachaven. She found it awaiting her in the hall when she returned home from her morning swim. She burst into the morning room with the letter in her hand. Her mother looked up from her work—she was perpetually engaged upon something vague in the worsted line—"And Blanche said 'let us go to Beachaven,' so they went to Beachaven and the evening and the morning were the first day," chanted Billy. Mrs. Holroyd looked puzzled.

"I don't know what you mean, Billy," she said, "and you're very irreverent and I believe your hair is wet."

Billy condescended to explain, somewhat explosively.

"How sweet of Blanche to think of it!" murmured Mrs. Holroyd contentedly, "now you and Jerry

will be able to see each other all day long. That will be lovely for you, darling, won't it?"

"Yes," said Billy, "I believe my hair *is* wet, I'll go and dry it."

She went upstairs to tidy herself for lunch with the nearest approach to a feeling of irritation of which her sunny nature was capable. She worked it off very soon, however, as she vigorously brushed her hair, and the momentary wish that she had the opportunity of brushing Blanche's for her also—perhaps a trifle more vigorously—made her laugh, and Billy was herself again.

The next day Lord Sutcliffe, with Blanche and Jerry, arrived and were installed by Blanche in the Imperial Hotel, and the local paper duly chronicled the fact under the heading of "fashionable intelligence," a heading which had never appeared in its columns before—and has not done so since.

About four o'clock in the afternoon, pursuant to instructions from Blanche, Jerry sallied forth in search of Sunny Bank and Billy. He found the former easily enough, but the latter was out. If he suffered any disappointment, he bore it wonderfully well. He was told that Mr. and Mrs. Holroyd were in the garden, so he joined them. Mrs. Holroyd was fast asleep in a deck-chair under the shade of a tree, and Mr. Holroyd was perspiringly practising drives with a captive golf ball on the lawn.

"Hullo, Jerry," he cried cheerily, "glad to see you. I've put your father up for the club, do you play golf? You ought to——"

Smash!

The captive golf ball, yearning to be free from the

mis-directed hits of its tormentor, escaped from its string and disappeared into the greenhouse. Mrs. Holroyd woke up.

"Dear Dick," she said placidly, "aren't you tiring yourself in the sun? How do you do, Jerry? Billy's golfing, Winnie's shrimping, and Sydney has gone down to the band."

They had tea in the garden, after which Mr. Holroyd took Jerry off to the links.

"We shall probably see Billy there," he said, "and, anyway, you ought to see the course, because you'll have to take up golf now you're here, there's nothing else to do."

Mr. Holroyd's golf was of the somewhat vigorous though totally ineffective kind, but, as the golf of his middle-aged opponent, who was waiting for him at the golf club, was of a precisely similar description, they had an excellent match and enjoyed themselves extremely.

Although Jerry knew nothing whatever about the game and the misspent efforts of these exponents did not tend to enlighten him, some of the attraction of the thing entered insidiously into his brain. Five o'clock on a summer afternoon, with the green turf under one's feet, the glorious blue of the sea before one's eyes, and a soft refreshing breeze to caress one's cheeks; all these constitute elements for enjoyment to him who experiences them, be he golfer or not. Jerry was only conscious of the enjoyment and did not seek to analyze the reasons for it. He was also mildly surprised, for his first impressions of Beachaven had been distinctly disappointing. He had no idea that it could be so attractive.

Strictly speaking, the Beachaven links did not provide very good golf. Half the holes were by the sea and half were inland, the turf was not of the true golfing character, hazards were few and far between, and such as existed were mostly artificial. Moreover, the course was a short one, there was practically no green which could not be reached in two strokes from the tee by a powerful hitter, and the principal difficulties which confronted the Beachaven golfer were exactly where they shouldn't be, namely, on the greens themselves, which were lumpy and fluky in character.

In spite of these disadvantages, however, there was an attraction about Beachaven and its golf which brought the same people regularly to the little place year after year. It became, in fact, a common centre round which familiar faces gathered and, if better golf could be obtained elsewhere, better sportsmen could not, so that the Beachaven club flourished, and long may it do so.

Billy was a fine golfer—a really fine golfer; that is to say, she was about as good as a girl can be at the game who does not aspire to championship class. In terms of golf her handicap was "scratch." That conveys nothing to the uninitiated, but it means that she could drive as far as a good many men and a great deal straighter than most, that she was accurate with her iron clubs when "approaching" the green, and absolutely deadly with her "putter" in holing out when she got there. She had the right temperament for the game also, and this, together with her lissom figure, her height and her physical strength, served to render her an opponent whom it was very hard to beat.

On this particular afternoon she was out playing with Gladys Wilson and beating her badly. She saw Jerry strolling after her father and his turf-tearing companion, and waved to him. He came over to her and carried her clubs for her—caddies are scarce at Beachaven, and Billy hadn't been able to get one.

Then Jerry's eyes were opened as to the beauties of golf. No longer was it a form of gentle exercise for elderly gentlemen in need of fresh air and violent conversation; no longer was the turf over which they passed dug up into the semblance of a miniature earthquake; a flash in the air of the club, a little spurt after it of green turf neatly dislodged, and away in the distance rose the ball like an aspiring pill against the sky. And it was all so easy, apparently.

Jerry felt that he would like to try his hand at it.

"All right," said Billy, amiably, "have a shot with my cleek," and she put down a ball on an inviting piece of turf.

Jerry swung at it with the careless confidence of inexperience. The club came through and finished of its own impetus over his left shoulder, and far away, rising in a graceful curve, Jerry saw a little speck of white.

"Did I hit that?" he gasped.

"Rather," laughed Billy; "fine shot!"

Jerry took off his glasses and wiped them.

"I think I shall like golf," he said.

Jerry forthwith joined the club and, on Billy's advice, put himself under the instruction of the professional. No more shots like the one just described, however, rewarded his efforts, and at the end of his hour's lesson he usually returned to the club house in

a state of limp despondency. There he chanced to meet one day a fellow sufferer of about an equal order of merit with himself, and golf matches of exceeding fierceness and an interminable number of strokes forthwith took place between them. They unfortunately rarely arrived at a decisive issue, as both players usually lost all their balls before completing the round. This rather disheartened them until they hit upon a novel and exciting method of scoring, the principle of which was that they should each start out with an equal number of balls and he who lost all of them first lost the match as well. It was also provided that if neither of them lost them all, then the loser was he who lost the most, but this proviso was quite unnecessary, as it never happened.

Jerry's golfing enthusiasm was a welcome surprise to Billy. She had been afraid that she would be expected to amuse him under the eagle eye of Blanche or, what was worse, that he would be expected to amuse her. As it was, they were each able to occupy themselves at opposite ends of the scale of golfing merit without boring each other. Blanche was quite satisfied if they were both on the links together, and it never entered her non-golfing mind that they might be a mile or so apart, which would in her opinion have been a most improper distance.

Jerry's golf was, however, doomed to have a check, for like all golfing neophytes he overdid it, with the result that Billy, on her return from bathing one day, found him sitting on the front, palpably cross and with nothing to do.

"Hullo, Jerry," she cried, "why not golfing?"

"Because I've ricked myself in at least three

different parts of my body, and I can't swing a club."

"Oh, that's nothing; you must chuck it up for a day or two, and then you'll be all right."

"And what am I to do instead?"

"Well, it is rather a one-horse show," she agreed cordially, "if you don't golf. I suppose you can walk?"

"Oh yes, but where to?"

"I have it," she said with sudden inspiration, "go and collect shells."

"Shells!" he echoed scornfully, "I suppose you mean fossils. There aren't any here."

"Oh yes there are, lots, in Norman's Cave, just underneath the cliff. It's all chalk, you know, just the very place for a geologist."

"A lot you know about it," he laughed.

The next morning Billy turned up at the hotel armed with a coal hammer, a garden trowel and a basket.

"I'm going geologizing," she said.

"Oh," remarked Jerry, looking up from his breakfast with polite interest.

"Yes, and you're coming too, so hurry up with that egg."

"My dear girl, I assure you it's not the least bit of use."

"I tell you it's a splendid place and, anyhow, it will give you an appetite for lunch. Besides, I haven't fagged these things all the way up here for nothing, so you've got to come."

That settled the matter and they set out.

"Is it far?" panted Jerry as he followed

after Billy, who took the lead with long, swinging strides.

"Oh no, 'bout another mile."

"Oh lor! we've been about two already."

"That's nothing, we've got to go over rocks and things presently."

They finally reached Norman's Cave, Billy flushed with healthy exercise and Jerry as limp as the seaweed which hung from the cliff side. He sat down and mopped his brow.

"I wish we could take a 'bus back," he grumbled.

Billy laughed.

"You are a fine geologist!" she cried; "now let's get to work."

She began digging into the chalky floor with her trowel. Presently she turned to him triumphantly.

"There! What did I tell you?" she said, "here's a beautiful fossil and here's another—why, there's quite a lot."

She dug furiously.

Jerry began to be interested and to forget his fatigue.

"Let me see," he said.

Billy handed him a round chalky object. He took it in his hand and then dropped it disgustedly.

"That's an *Echinocorys*," he said pompously; "in other words, a sea urchin. It's no good digging for them; they're as common as dirt and no use to any one."

Billy looked genuinely disappointed.

"Oh, Jerry," she said, "I don't see how an echino—something could possibly be common." She produced a piece of candle from the basket. Jerry watched her

sulkily. Billy felt inclined to shake him, for she had planned this expedition entirely on his account and she thought that he might have been a little grateful. She put down his churlishness, however, to his ricked back and amiably excused it. She handed him the candle.

"Buck up, old chap," she said; "there's another cave leading out of this; you might find all sorts of things—you never know your luck."

Jerry rose reluctantly.

"It's pure waste of time," he said; "no, I don't want the trowel nor the hammer, my penknife will do for anything I find."

He stumbled off into the interior of the cave, which forked at the end into two smaller ones. He turned at the entrance of one of them. Billy was making the walls of the cavern ring with mighty swings of the coal hammer.

"This is not a coal mine," he remarked.

"It's excellent practice for golf anyway," she laughed.

Jerry proceeded to explore. He had to walk in a stooping position to prevent knocking his head against the roof of the cave, and the candle smoked and the smoke got in his eyes and made him cough. He put the candle on a ledge and made a more or less systematic investigation of his surroundings, probing into the chalk with his penknife and occasionally using his pocket lens. There were undoubtedly fossil remains in the cave, none of them particularly good, and all of them of the most ordinary kind commonly met with in such formations. He picked up a *Terebratula* or two, and an *Inoceramus* in a more than usually perfect

state of preservation was promptly transferred to his pocket, but his time was chiefly occupied in picking up and relighting the candle, which was perpetually falling down, no matter where he put it. After about twenty minutes of this sort of thing he felt that he had had about enough of it and, hot and chalky, he returned to the more lofty chamber where he had left Billy.

He found her busy and excited, dislodging chunks of chalk with her improvised pick and throwing them into the basket.

She stopped when she saw him, radiant.

"I've found heaps and heaps of fossils," she cried.

"Where are they?" he queried.

"In the basket."

Jerry examined the contents with a casual glance of his eye, then he took up one of the pieces of chalk and looked at it more closely with his glass; then he fell on his knees beside the basket and rummaged in it with excited fingers.

"Isn't it splendid?" cried Billy. "What did I tell you? I think geology's rather fun; almost as good as fishing. Why, what's the matter?"

"Only that you've completely spoilt what is—*was*, I should say—the best specimen of a fossil fish that's been found on this coast for years."

Jerry spoke in a voice which trembled with disappointment and temper.

"A fossil fish!" exclaimed Billy; "what fun!"

She picked up her hammer and renewed her attack upon the wall of the cave.

"Let's find some more," she continued, "there's

more than one fish in the sea, so there ought to be more than one fossil fish in the rock."

"You needn't trouble," he replied bitterly; "fossil fish aren't as numerous as birds' eggs."

"Well, how was I to know?" said Billy; "you never told me. I should have thought you might have guessed there were fossil fish in here. However, let's go back to lunch."

They stumbled homewards over the rocks, Jerry silent because he was out of breath and out of temper, and Billy equally so because she was slightly out of temper as well. She didn't care a button for "shells," as she called all geological remains, but she had made an effort to interest herself in Jerry's hobby, had refused to allow her ardour to be damped by his surliness, and had considered her strenuous demolition of the fossil fish a complete vindication of the success of the trip she had planned. It was rather disconcerting to find that she had merely made a fool of herself. She resolved to confine her attention in future to matters she understood.

Amongst those matters she included Jerry—which was rather a mistake on her part.

CHAPTER IV

At 210 Lancaster Gate bustle and confusion reigned supreme, for Billy was to be married on the morrow, and, as everybody knows, an event of that kind conveys the impression upon the eve of its occurrence that no one had ever thought of it before, instead of its having been anxiously anticipated for weeks.

Billy was the only person who had not been deflected from the normal; every one else in the house was suffering from badly suppressed excitement. The state of their nerves showed itself in a tendency to shout, to drop things and break them, to lay down other things and lose them, to be generally late for meals, and to possess no appetite for them when they arrived.

Billy moved amongst her relations serene and calm. She was sorry that they couldn't eat their meals, but, after all, that was their affair and *her* appetite was excellent. She didn't particularly care about being alternately fondled and scolded by her mother, continually fussed over by her sister, and periodically philosophized to by her father, but it seemed to be a part of the game, so she submitted to it with the same amiability with which she underwent the ordeal of perpetually trying on things and having pins stuck into her.

"My marriage seems to be the most important

event in the lives of everybody except me," she remarked to Blanche, who on this particular morning had looked in at Lancaster Gate with a view to introducing order into chaos, but had merely added to it.

"You'd better go out for a walk," said Blanche, "and leave your relations completely at liberty to get in each other's way."

She spoke grumpily, for she was not in a very good temper that morning. Blanche liked things to be done decently and in order, and from the state of nerves of those about her there seemed very little probability of their ever being done at all. Moreover, Billy had rushed things. Blanche would have liked the marriage to have taken place in the respectable month of May, but Billy had said that she wanted "to get it over," and had insisted upon being married in November. She suggested the Fifth, but even Jerry kicked at that, although Billy carefully explained to him that it is the bride who is the guy upon these occasions. He had replied, with an unusual show of spirit for him, that he had no desire to marry a guy.

Billy ran upstairs to put on her hat. She found her mother and Winnie having a heated altercation with a young woman from the dressmaker's.

"It's too bad," wailed Mrs. Holroyd. "Mrs. Smithson told me that we should have the dress here this morning without fail, and now I don't suppose we shall get it at all."

"I assure you, madam, it shall arrive this afternoon by three o'clock. There is just that trifling alteration to the train which——"

"And it will be all wrong when it comes, and then——" She caught sight of Billy, who had seized

her hat and was making for the door. "Billy, your wedding-dress hasn't come, and I don't believe it ever will, and——"

"Then, darling, I'll borrow one of your tablecloths and get married in that; it'll do just as well."

She kissed her mother affectionately.

"Dear, don't worry about such trifles," she said. "Three o'clock will do admirably," she added to the dressmaker's assistant, and ran downstairs and out of the house, glad to be rid of cardboard boxes, tissue paper and tears, which seemed to have got hopelessly commingled of late.

She entered the Park and strode through it in the direction of Kensington with characteristic energy. It was a typical November morning, murky and muddy, and the Park was apparently deserted of all other occupants save untenanted chairs, despondent trees and pertinacious sparrows. It was not exactly the kind of day which the average Londoner would have selected for walking exercise, and the Park, with its wet grass, decaying leaves and damp fog, was certainly not the place. It would have depressed most people, but it seemed to exhilarate Billy, for she broke into a cheerful whistle. She paused for a few moments by the Round Pond. It was a melancholy looking sheet of water, with a diminutive craft labouring in the centre whilst its owner, with a broken string in his hand, gazed disconsolately from the bank, and St. Mary Abbot's, veiled in fog, peered in the distance.

To the artist or the poet there would have seemed something allegorical about the little boy waiting on the shore for his boat to return to him. It would never do so, because he hadn't known how to set the

sails, and it would drift about haphazard in the fog until he got tired of waiting and went home. But Billy had no artistic or poetic tendencies. She had a fair share of good nature, however—and half a crown. She parted with the latter. It was a very effective method of dealing with the situation, for the vessel in question would have been dear at eighteenpence.

Then she went home and ate an excellent lunch in spite of the gloomy prophecies of her mother as to the probability—or rather improbability—of the bridal dress arriving in time. As a matter of fact, it appeared punctually on the stroke of three, as promised, and Billy was rushed upstairs to put it on. Her mother wept copiously at the prospect of the dress not fitting and Billy looking frightful, and still more copiously when it was discovered that it fitted perfectly and that Billy looked lovely. It was, in fact, a thoroughly melancholy proceeding, and, as Billy said, "quite a question whether it was not more damp inside the house than out."

It was certainly thoroughly damp outside, for a steady drizzle had set in, which was worse than if it had actually poured, for the latter would have cleared the fog away. Blanche looked in again at tea-time.

"I've brought the tickets," she said to Billy, "and here they are. You break the journey at Folkestone and Paris, and then straight through to Marseilles, where you go aboard for Alexandria, then on to Cairo."

Billy pocketed the tickets quietly—Billy had a pocket, she insisted on it.

"Why give them to me?" she asked.

"Because Jerry would be sure to lose them; he always does."

"I wonder if I'm to be his nurse, or his mother," she murmured, as she proceeded to pour out tea, but nobody heard her remark, which was perhaps as well.

Dinner was not a particularly lively meal. The fog had thickened and penetrated to all parts of the house. The dining-room was full of it, and the soup tasted of it; "*bouillon à la brouillard*," Mr. Holroyd christened it in a moment of expansive humour, but, his accent being deplorable, he had to explain his meaning, which made his somewhat feeble joke fall rather flat.

Sydney was in an aggressive mood. He nearly sent his mother into hysterics by prognosticating an awful fog for the next day. He drew a pathetic picture of the bridegroom waiting in a fog-bound church whilst the bride was driven to some different edifice altogether and married to the wrong man by mistake.

"What would you do then, Billy?" he asked.

"Well, that would depend upon what the wrong man was like," she replied contentedly; "he might do just as well."

Mr. Holroyd filled his glass with port and cleared his throat.

"Billy," he said, "I drink to your future happiness. May all your married days be as bright as——" He paused for a fitting simile, and the fog seized its opportunity to choke him into a fit of coughing.

"As this one," concluded Sydney for him; "bravo, dad! very eloquent, very eloquent indeed."

"You shouldn't joke, dear, about serious matters," remonstrated his mother.

They went upstairs to the drawing-room. Mrs. Holroyd settled down to Patience, Winnie to a romantic

novel, Mr. Holroyd to sleep, and Sydney to teasing Billy on the subject of the marriage service.

"I hope you know your part," he said, "because, if you don't, you'd better learn it and rehearse it with me."

"Don't be a silly ass," she laughed, "I've only got to say 'I will' at intervals; it's only a 'walking part.'"

She retired to her room early that night and was followed upstairs by her mother, who fussed round her with maternal tenderness to such an extent that Billy felt a most horrible fraud. She was immensely relieved when her mother finally left her, and she promptly locked her door. Were one's relations always as trying as this on these occasions? she wondered. She partly undressed and arranged herself comfortably in her armchair before the fire. She didn't want to be disturbed again; that was why she had locked her door; for it was quite on the cards that Winnie would seek to put in an appearance. For the last few nights she had done so, and she had sat and gazed at her shortly-to-be-married sister with a kind of romantic awe which Billy had found quite embarrassing. Perhaps when Winnie found the door locked she would go away, perhaps she wouldn't; in that case she might stay outside; cold feet are an excellent antidote for romance.

She didn't want Winnie that night. She didn't want any one. She wished to be alone. For, even to practical-minded Billy, to-night was an exceptional occasion. To-night she would say good-bye to her old self, and to-morrow she was going to be some one new. To-morrow was going to be Emancipation Day. Billy

chuckled ; she hadn't been exactly a slave up till now. She had usually managed to get her own way, although, of course, she had been obliged to give in to a certain extent to her father and mother, and even her brother's opinions were not always to be disregarded. But to-morrow there would be no one to control her actions, no one whose opinions mattered at all ; except, of course, in the eyes of the world,—her husband. Billy chuckled again ; if the world only knew !

She kicked off her shoes and toasted her feet at the bars of the grate. Yes, it was good to be free ; and it was very difficult for women to be free. Until they were married they were at the beck and call of their relations, and after they were married they were at the beck and call of their husbands—or their children ; whilst if they never married at all, they became absorbed in the decayed sisterhood of spinsters who wore mob caps and were the humble slaves of inflated pug dogs and attenuated dachshunds. But *she* had escaped all that. She was going to have all the advantages of married life and none of the drawbacks. There were considerable advantages—an enlarged circle of acquaintances, an improved social status, and the ability to do what she liked. It would make a man of her, she reflected, which was a great deal more than any one would ever be able to make of her husband.

She stretched out a lazy hand for her prayer-book, which was lying on the mantelpiece ; perhaps, as Sydney had said, she ought to learn her part. She glanced idly at the service ; yes, her part was a very easy one ; she only had to say "I will," and repeat something or other after the clergyman. She began to read the service through. It wasn't easy to do so,

because the type was so small and the light over her dressing-table was some distance from the fire. She had never read it before, probably because of the minute print. The analogy occurred to her mind of the by-laws on the backs of railway tickets which every passenger is assumed to have read, but which are printed so small that nobody is able to do so. She became quite interested in her task and poked up the fire so as to get a better light.

She was too absorbed to notice for some time that some one was knocking at the door. It was Winnie, of course. When Billy at length heard her, she rose from her seat, but changed her mind and sat down again. Perhaps if she let Winnie go on knocking, she would get tired of the exercise and go away. Winnie, however, had no intention of going away.

"It's no use your pretending, Billy," she called through the key-hole, "because I can see the light under your door and I know you aren't asleep."

Billy resigned herself to the inevitable. She got up and stretched herself, and went and opened the door.

"All right, Kid," she said good naturedly, "come in."

Winnie promptly availed herself of the invitation. She only had a light wrapper thrown over her night-dress, and her feet were bare. She ran to the fire and warmed herself.

"You are a chucklehead to go running about the house like that," said Billy, as she proceeded to complete undressing, "especially on a night like this."

Winnie squatted down on the hearth rug.

"Oh, it's lovely," she cooed, "when you're getting warm again. You were a beast not to let me in before."

"I was half asleep and I didn't hear you," said Billy, energetically brushing her hair.

"Oh, what a cram!" cried Winnie; "I heard you moving about. Why, you've been reading the marriage service!" she exclaimed. "How lovely!" She seized the prayer-book and began quoting.

"'With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow.' Oh, Billy, it's heavenly!"

"It sounds to me distinctly earthly; anyhow, the last part."

"I wonder what it feels like!" sighed Winnie, ecstatically.

"What feels like?"

"Being in love."

"Don't be an ass, Kid."

"Oh, but do tell me, I want to know—I believe I *do* know, though," she added.

Billy glanced at her amused.

"What does it feel like, then?" she asked. "You tell *me*."

Winnie drew up her knees, and nestled her chin upon them.

"Well," she said, "I'm sure it feels like this. When you love a person *awfully*, awfully enough to want to marry him, then you want to be always near him, to be able to see him, to hear him talk, to anticipate his wishes, to suffer pain for him if need be, for that will only make it greater pleasure. That I think is being in love."

"Oh, do you? And what about him? What's he doing all this time?"

"Oh, I—I never thought about him. I suppose he's doing the same."

She came over to Billy, who was sitting before her glass, and leant over the back of her chair whilst she ran her sister's soft hair through her fingers.

> "For better for worse, for richer for poorer,
> in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish,
> till death us do part,"

she quoted.

Billy turned to her surprised.

"Why, Winnie," she said, "you know it all by heart."

"Of course I do. You're not the only person who knows the marriage service, I can tell you."

"I don't know it."

"You don't know it?"

"I never looked at it before to-night."

"Oh, Billy, how awful!"

Billy got out of her chair impatiently, and walked to the fire.

"My dear Kid," she said; "why?"

"Because, Billy, it's so—holy."

"It's nothing of the sort—at least, to me."

Winnie sat down limply on the edge of the bed, with a look of horrified astonishment on her face. Billy began to feel irritated.

"For goodness' sake don't look like that!" she said crossly.

"I don't understand you a bit," said Winnie in a tremulous voice, and then she suddenly burst out

sobbing. As her elder sister had often remarked, Winnie was inclined to be moist.

Billy wished she hadn't spoken quite so frankly; however, having gone so far, she felt that she had better go on. She sat down beside her sister.

"Now, Winnie, don't be silly," she said; "can you keep a secret?"

"Of c—c—course I c—can," sobbed Winnie, whose emotion became speedily overpowered by curiosity.

"Well then, I don't love Jerry a bit, and he doesn't love me. We're marrying because it happens to suit us, and our marriage is really only a matter of form."

Billy was afraid that her latest piece of news was going to set her sister off again, but Winnie remained quite quiet for at least a minute. Then she suddenly nearly startled Billy out of her life, for she threw her arms round her neck and sobbed—

"You mustn't marry him, Billy; you *mustn't*, it's wicked!"

CHAPTER V

JERRY opened his eyes and sleepily regarded his man, who had just entered the room with his early morning tea. He sipped it lazily whilst the other proceeded to arrange his master's clothes. Thompson was usually a silent man, but this morning he seemed to be imbued with the desire for conversation.

"It's a lovely day, sir," he remarked, as he unsuccessfully endeavoured to remove a non-existent speck of dust from a brand-new pair of trousers.

"Is it?" queried the man in the bed uninterestedly.

"Yes, sir, wonderful for the time of year, seeing as we're now half-way through November. Very fortunate, sir, isn't it?"

"What's fortunate?" growled Jerry, who was half asleep again.

Thompson drew himself up to his full height—he was a tall man—and regarded his employer with reproachful dignity.

"This is your wedding-day," he said.

Jerry opened one eye and became positively interested.

"By Jove! so it is," he murmured, and turned over on the other side.

Thompson proceeded to action. He walked into the adjoining room and turned on the bath water.

Then he returned to the bedroom, and took up an attitude of patient expectation by the door. Jerry shifted irritably in his bed.

"I wish you'd go away," he said.

"It's nearly ten o'clock," replied the immovable Thompson.

"Well, I'm not going to be married before lunch."

"I think the bath water's running over."

"Then turn it off."

Thompson returned to the bathroom, and the sound of running water ceased. Then he re-entered the bedroom and deliberately pulled down the blinds.

Jerry started up in bed.

"What the devil are you doing?" he cried, this time thoroughly awake.

"I thought you wanted to go to sleep, sir."

"Oh, go to blazes! and get my breakfast. Yes, draw up those blinds and clear out; I'll get up all right —without you, your face worries me."

"Very good, sir," replied Thompson imperturbably, restoring daylight to the room.

He closed the door softly behind him, and Jerry proceeded to yawn himself out of bed. It was a somewhat leisurely proceeding: first a skinny leg thrust itself shivering from the bed, to be reluctantly joined by its fellow some moments later, then the owner of the pair sat up and regarded them as if surprised at their energy; apparently reconciled to the inevitable, he allowed his feet to find their way into a pair of carpet slippers, and to transport him towards the adjacent bathroom, where he paused for a moment to stretch himself before the glass. It was a weird little figure that met his gaze—not to him—he was used to it;

any one who was not used to it would have laughed, and even Thompson, who was, had been known to smile; Thompson only smiled under great provocation.

In his ordinary clothes Jerry would probably pass unnoticed; that was due to his tailor. With regard to pyjamas, however, it was quite another matter; there a man is allowed to consult his individual taste, and Jerry fairly let himself go. He usually favoured a violent combination of purple, orange, and scarlet, which gave a dare-devil appearance to the little man ludicrously at variance with his diminutive form and blinking, short-sighted eyes. The garments themselves seemed obviously out of sympathy with their wearer. They hung round him in loose, dejected folds as if despondent at their fate in being compelled to cover so puny and inoffensive a citizen, whereas they were obviously intended by their designer to adorn the manly form of some lawless member of society with a tendency towards wrenching off knockers, frightening old women, and battering policemen, to say the least of it. It may be that this brave show of colour was due to the last lingering traces of heredity handed down to respectable, anæmic Jerry by some rowdy and remote ancestor. There were suits of armour in Sutcliffe Hall which had been presumably worn by his forbears; judging by the family records, these gentlemen would have been quite capable of wrenching off knockers had they existed amongst those symbols of civilization. Jerry's ancestors were not noted for their law-abiding qualities; their descendant lived up to their memory by violating every law of art, but those were the only laws that he had ever been known to break.

He wandered into his dining-room and began

dawdling through his breakfast. It was the last breakfast that he would ever take as a bachelor, so there was some point in making the most of it. This was also the last day on which he would be in active occupation of his flat. A new tenant had already been secured, and to-morrow Thompson would begin moving his master's things into his new house to await his return from his honeymoon. Jerry was becoming quite sorrowful reflecting over his past bachelor comforts when Blake arrived, tempestuously knocking over a chair in his entrance ; that was Blake's way. Blake was Jerry's best man.

Jerry looked up.

"Hullo, Blake," he said ; "kidney, kipper, or coffee ? "

The new-comer regarded him disgustedly.

"You surely don't imagine that I haven't had my breakfast. Do you know that it's eleven o'clock, and that you're going to be married at half-past two ? "

Jerry cracked his inoffensive egg with a violence that savoured of brutality.

"Do I know that I'm going to be married ? *Don't* I ? I've got a new coat on that pinches me under the arms, new boots that hurt my feet, a valet who won't let me lie in bed because it's my wedding-day, and a best man who won't let me eat my breakfast for the same reason. Oh yes, I know it all right, thanks very much."

"You're an ungrateful beast," said Blake placidly ; "I just looked in to see that you understood all the arrangements."

"I don't want to understand the arrangements—they're your affair."

"Come, I like that! *I'm* not going to be married."

"No, but you're doing the marrying. My dear friend, have you so far forgotten the teaching of your schooldays that you don't know the verb 'to marry' is active, but the verb 'to be married' is passive?"

"Oh, rot!"

"It isn't rot; I am going to be driven to the church in a taxi, which will be summoned by you—probably paid for at some distant date by me. At the church you will put me in a seat and sit by me, and keep me comfortable and happy until at the right time you will push me up alongside a beautiful lady dressed in white, who I understand is to be my wife. At some period or other I am to put a ring on her finger—I don't know what period nor which finger—I rely upon you to know the time and upon the lady to know the place——"

Blake got up and put on his hat.

"I don't think I've ever heard you talk quite such complete drivel before," he said; "if the lady has, and is going to marry you in spite of it, she must be a born lunatic."

He opened the door and paused impressively with his hand on the handle.

"All I can say to you is this," he remarked; "with your profound interest in what is going to occur, you'll be jolly lucky if you don't find yourself married to one of the bridesmaids by mistake."

Jerry returned to his interrupted meal. Afterwards he loafed into the Park, it seemed the best method of getting through the morning; moreover, the weather was such as to tempt the most lackadaisical into the air. It was one of the days which give the lie to those

who describe November as a gloomy month, and which though not uncommon in the country, but rarely visit the metropolis. The sun smiled upon London out of a cloudless sky, and the air was stimulating, yet soft and caressing. It was as if the sweetness of the departed summer had been absorbed into a mighty sponge and squeezed out over the smoky city by some amiably disposed giant, who had not thereby deprived the air of its autumnal crispness which made a walk in the streets enjoyable, and a ride on a motor-'bus exhilarating. It was a summer day, in fact—with a touch of ice in it; just the very sort of day upon which a vigorous, clean minded, healthy bodied young person like Billy ought to be married—to a suitable mate.

The Row was empty, save for half a dozen riders. Jerry leant over the rails and watched them as they flashed by, man and beast revelling in sunshine and motion; it was too violent a form of exercise to appeal to him in any other capacity than that of spectator. He turned and strolled leisurely homewards to lunch. He had hardly sat down to it when Blake turned up again. Jerry turned a by no means welcoming face to his visitor.

"What on earth have you come back for?" he asked.

"To take you to church."

"Don't be an ass; there's heaps of time."

"My dear fellow, I'm best man, and I've got lots of things to do after we get there."

"Well, go and do them."

"I'm not going without you. What the deuce do you want lunch for? You've only just had breakfast."

"I'm keeping my strength up."

"You'll find it an expensive process—I've got a taxi ticking away tuppence to the minute downstairs."

Jerry got up with an aggrieved air.

"That settles it," he said, "I positively cannot eat my lunch at so much a minute, and, anyhow, your company, in your present condition, is a guarantee of indigestion."

They entered the waiting taxi, and drove to the church. It was only about half-past one and there certainly seemed no occasion for this frantic hurry, but Blake was a nervous, fussy individual, with an infinite capacity for constructing mountains out of molehills. That is not the quality usually sought for in a best man, but Jerry had been obliged to obtain his at somewhat short notice.

The "lots of things to do" which Blake had referred to seemed as if they would have to be performed by him unassisted, for when they got to the church it was apparently shut up. They wandered round it somewhat disconsolately, but there was no sign of life visible except a contemplative cat which was sitting on a roll of red felt in front of the church door. The sight of the red carpet encouraged them a little, for it denoted that a marriage was going to take place at some time or other.

Jerry seated himself on a stone ledge inside the entrance gates.

"*J'y suis, j'y reste,*" he remarked; "I may also add that you are the most supreme example of the perfect blighter that I have yet met. I say this to cheer you up and because you seem to be under the impression that your efforts have not been sufficiently appreciated."

Blake was apparently too much crushed by the

absence of preparations to retort in suitable language. He went up to the church door and relieved his feelings by shaking it ineffectively. The cat approached and inserted a sympathetic claw into his leg. That gave him an opportunity for speech of which he availed himself, after which he seated himself beside Jerry, and awaited events. After a time—it seemed like an hour, but it was probably ten minutes—an ancient person appeared on the scene and proceeded to unroll the carpet with leisurely backward paces. Arriving opposite Jerry and Blake, he became mildly aware of their existence. He creaked himself into an upright position—he was a creaky old man from his boots to his shoulder joints.

"Want anything?" he asked.

"I want to be married," replied Jerry, "and my friend wants you first of all to kill your cat, and then to give him some sticking plaster."

The old man apparently possessed no sense of humour. However, he possessed a key. He proceeded to open the church door.

"You can go in if you like."

"Thanks," said Jerry; "there seems to be plenty of room."

They entered the church, and Blake deposited Jerry in a pew near the chancel. He then hurried off to fuss about various things, and left him to his own devices. Jerry felt that he was being very badly treated. He gazed round at the empty church. The sides of the pews were decked with tall, white flowers, and there was a scent of lilies in the air. It was all very tastefully arranged, he reflected, but that was no reason why his lunch should have been disturbed.

Moreover, he felt such a fool, sitting quite alone in a big, empty church waiting until some one should come along and marry him. It was as if he were a parcel left to be called for which had got misdirected to a place where there was no demand for the article. When Blake at length returned to him he proceeded to ventilate his grievances.

"I feel as if I was being buried, not married," he said, "you're the undertaker, and I'm the corpse. But there don't seem to be any mourners," he added plaintively.

"Oh, they'll come along presently—that's one of them now."

It wasn't a mourner, but Sydney Holroyd, who had been told off to show people into their seats.

"Hullo!" he said, when he saw Jerry; "you *are* keen. Got in by the early doors, I suppose? I told Billy you probably wouldn't turn up."

"Did you?" said Jerry; "and what did she say?"

"Well, she didn't exactly say 'no such luck,' because that wouldn't be polite, but I inferred that that was what she meant."

"Thanks so much—you'll make a delightful brother-in-law."

The audience—as Sydney somewhat irreverently termed them—began to arrive, first in spots and then in a regular shower—as his sister would have said. Ticking taxis and throbbing motors disgorged at the gateway leading to the porch, and Sydney found himself fully engaged in escorting their occupants to their places. Jim arrived amongst the rest—he walked—he eluded Sydney's kind offer of a "front stall," and

took up a more unobtrusive position in a corner seat bordering the aisle lower down the church. Jim had been in two minds about coming at all. There was no necessity for him to do so, for his professional occupations would have provided an excellent explanation of his absence. Busy barristers—and Jim was busy now—are not expected to go to weddings except their own; their interest in marriage is supposed to arise later. At the last moment Jim made up his mind to come, sent out his hat to be ironed, bought a pair of new gloves a size too small for him, and left his practice and his clerk to take care of themselves—or rather, each other.

As he sat in the church watching the people arrive and listening to the organ, he wondered why he had come after all; for he loved Billy; he wanted to marry her; coming to see somebody else do so seemed to be unnecessarily rubbing it in. It is true that he had resigned himself to the inevitable—well, one resigns oneself to an aching tooth, but one need not be always worrying it. The tooth had almost ceased aching of late; all the more reason for leaving it alone; nevertheless, one doesn't—and Jim was here.

He sat and watched the congregation. He wondered why they had come—apparently to see each other's dresses. The restless atmosphere which always pervades these functions jarred upon him. Like most people who do not enter a church often, Jim did so with reverence. To him a church was something more than mere bricks and mortar; to these people it seemed only to be an excellent place for the performance of the show they had come to see. They greeted each other on their way down the aisle, and stopped to chat upon any mutual topic of interest; it was a kind of

pleasant conversazione with organ accompaniment. Jim wondered what would happen if the organ suddenly ceased playing and these banalities acquired a simultaneous prominence. Would these people feel ashamed of themselves, or would it be the vicar who would feel ashamed—of his organist?

From which it appears that Jim was thoroughly old fashioned in his ideas.

The arrival of the bridal party put an end to further meditation. The familiar "Voice that breathed o'er Eden" began its accustomed performance, and the congregation stood up to watch Billy's progress up the aisle on the arm of her father, to wonder how she liked it, and to criticize or admire her wedding-dress, according to their several temperaments. All women do not show to advantage in their wedding gowns; many of them look like dolls, and others as if they had just stepped off the top of a Christmas cake; but Billy was not of these. Whether it was her commanding height, or her apparent unconsciousness that she was wearing anything out of the common or doing anything unusual, the result was that she made a very charming and attractive bride, and produced an agreeable sense of freshness. She saw Jim at once, and threw him a friendly smile. She passed him and he watched her standing by the chancel gates—a tall figure in white towering above her bridesmaids—and then she was joined by a diminutive little man with sandy hair. Jim had seen Jerry before, but he had never realized him until that moment. Suddenly the intense incongruity of the thing crystallized in his brain—his Billy married to that!

Then the service began. To Jim it seemed a

mockery, a sacrilege. What was Billy about? Did she know what she was doing? Did the people all round him realize the nature of what they were witnessing. He banished his reflections with an effort, and concentrated himself upon the service. The beautiful words of the ceremony struck an answering chord in his being. He found himself unconsciously repeating to himself after the preacher, "I, James Stone, take thee to my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse——" Ah! if it were only he standing there at her side, how different it would all be!

Presently it was over. The Wedding March blazed into sound. Billy was a wife. She came down the aisle on the arm of her husband. Jim looked at the insignificant little man, and the desire possessed him to wrench him away from Billy and take his place. Instead of which he slipped out of the church and went back to his chambers.

Billy settled herself comfortably in the carriage.

"Well, Jerry," she said, "I've promised to love and obey you—I hope you'll be a kind master."

Jerry regarded his bride admiringly.

"I've promised one or two things as well," he laughed; "but I don't suppose you will call for delivery."

"Mutual debts make long friends," she replied. "We've got what tradesmen call a 'contra account.'"

The wedding reception was held at an adjacent hotel, and there for about an hour Billy amiably showed herself off to her admiring friends.

"I feel like a waxwork," she said to Winnie; "as for poor old Jerry, he's simply melting—just look at him."

Jerry certainly presented a very limp appearance, the absence of his lunch and his unwonted exertions during the last couple of hours had quite tired him out. He came up to Billy.

"What time does our train go?"

"Five o'clock; you've got another half-hour of this, and you'll have it on your own too, for I'm going off to change my things."

She made her escape from the crowded room, and Jerry followed her example as soon as he decently could. He had to change too, and he also wanted a breath of fresh air, for the reception room was stifling. He resigned himself to the care of Thompson, who proceeded to pack his master into a brand-new suit. Then he lit a cigarette and waited until some one should send for him. He tried to rouse his stolid servant, who was packing his bag.

"I don't think I shall get married again, Thompson," he said.

Thompson regarded him placidly.

"Under existing circumstances, sir," he said, "you'll get about seven years if you do."

"You've no sense of humour," said Jerry petulantly.

"No, sir," replied Thompson, as he finished his packing. "Your hot-water bottle is on top."

Presently the carriage arrived to take the newly married pair to the station, and Jerry went downstairs. There was the usual excitement attendant upon a honeymoon departure, and the usual inconvenient things down the back of their necks thrown by sympathetic friends who desired them to start their married life comfortably. Mrs. Holroyd alternately embraced

her daughter and talked twenty to the dozen to Lord Sutcliffe, who listened with patient boredom—she didn't know whether she felt most inclined to laugh or to cry, so she did both by turns.

"Thank goodness that's over!" sighed Billy, as the carriage set off at a smart trot. She gave a little wriggle of discomfort. "In future," she said, "rice shall be exclusively reserved for our puddings."

At Victoria an obsequious guard locked them into a first-class compartment.

"First stop Maidstone, second stop Folkestone," he said, as he pocketed Jerry's half-crown; "I'll be round to let you out when you arrive."

They seated themselves at opposite ends of the carriage: Billy stretched herself luxuriously and placed her feet on the opposite seat, Jerry's dangled over his and barely touched the ground. He glanced admiringly at his wife as the train glided out of the station.

"You look splendid," he said.

"You may smoke but you mustn't flirt," replied Billy, engrossing herself in the pages of the *Sporting and Dramatic*.

Jerry availed himself of the invitation and lit a cigarette. He had bought a pile of papers, but he didn't want to read them. He was a prey to new sensations and they were rather pleasant ones; he wanted to enjoy them. He had entered into this marriage as a convenient arrangement, and he was just beginning to appreciate how very convenient it was. He looked across at Billy engaged in reading her paper. As he had said, she looked splendid, her long figure was stretched across the carriage. She was lounging and yet she was graceful, she was always

graceful, but it had never struck him quite so forcibly before. He began to feel that he was lucky to have found such a wife.

They rattled into Penge Tunnel. Billy put down her paper until they should have passed through it, for the noise distracted her attention from what she was reading.

Jerry studied her face as she leant back in her seat with her eyes partially closed. Yes. She was almost beautiful; probably many people would consider her to be quite so. Her chin was perhaps rather square, and her mouth rather big for a girl, but somehow these did not seem to constitute defects in *her*, and her complexion was glorious and her eyes brimful of health. She opened them, as they rushed out of the tunnel, and confronted Jerry's gaze.

"What is it?" she asked; "have I got a smut on my nose?"

"No," he replied, with what he intended for a tender inflexion in his voice; "I was only admiring you, my dear."

Billy returned to her paper.

"I will not be called 'my dear' until I'm forty—and I hope not then," she laughed, and declined to be drawn into further conversation until they arrived at Folkestone.

There was a cold breeze blowing off the sea as they stepped on to the platform.

Billy drew the air into her lungs with a little gasp of pleasure, and Jerry shivered and turned up the collar of his overcoat. They got into the omnibus which was waiting and drove to their hotel. Their arrival was evidently expected. A man in a frock coat, who looked

as if he was the manager, but probably wasn't, ushered them into the hall.

"Show this lady and gentleman to number thirty-nine, James," he said to an attendant sprite.

Billy crossed the hall and conferred with the young lady in charge of the office. Then she returned to her husband with a slight flush on her handsome face. The bookkeeper beckoned to the frock-coated official and he crossed to her. Then he returned to the attendant who was waiting to show the way to the new arrivals.

"Show this lady to number twenty-eight," he said, "and the gentleman to number forty."

Billy and Jerry followed their guide upstairs, and the man in the frock coat gazed after them. He scratched his head, apparently puzzled. Then he winked at the bookkeeper.

"That's funny," he said.

CHAPTER VI

FEBRUARY found Billy and her husband installed in their new house in Queen's Gate. There was nothing remarkable about their honeymoon except its length, but they had both experienced such a good time under the influence of the balmy air, the blue skies and the sunshine of the South, that they had desired to prolong it as long as possible. After about two months of this sort of thing they began dawdling home along the Mediterranean, and finally arrived in London in the middle of February and a poisonous black fog.

It had been a particularly enjoyable trip for both of them, perhaps the more so because each had privately anticipated being bored in the other's company. They had married each other for mutual independence, in order that each might go his or her own way, but the conventions required that for at least a fortnight they should pursue the same path. They had mutually agreed that as England was intolerable at that time of year they should extend this period for a month, but neither of them had expected that they would wish to make it longer than that, and Billy had resigned herself to the apparently inevitable fate of having her energy hampered by her feeble little husband, whilst he had equally resigned himself to the prospect of having to trot about at his wife's skirts and get out of breath.

Whereas, nothing of the sort happened. Neither

bored the other, neither hampered nor tired the other, the scenes they visited were fresh to each, and both were equally interested in them. In different ways, of course, according to their natures. Jerry's affection for the old and useless was not confined to fossils, and the Pyramids appealed to him on account of their antiquarian interest, but Billy was equally fascinated by the idea of playing golf round them and of putting over " browns " of baked Nile mud instead of " greens " of English turf. Again, Jerry liked pottering round the native shops of Cairo, but Billy was quite content to accompany him with her kodak, snapshotting the animated scenes around her and deriving considerable amusement from watching her quaint little husband as he bargained for the latest antiquity from Birmingham. Jerry developed a veritable passion for purchasing fearsome weapons from awe-inspiring Arabs. It was a sight for the gods to see him in heated altercation with some brawny bedouin of the desert, the latter brandishing a wicked-looking sword in his hand, and the former obviously in doubt as to whether the weapon was intended for sale or murder. As a matter of fact, the swarthy-looking gentleman was probably a perfectly peaceful citizen, and only engaged in explaining with Oriental emphasis that the sword had been blessed by the prophet, but as Jerry didn't understand a word he was saying he could only judge the speaker's intentions by his gesticulations, which were not reassuring. At the end of the day Jerry would return to the hotel laden with a collection of antiquated muzzle-loaders and unpleasant-looking knives, whilst Billy stalked by his side feeling as if she was married to a man who had just gone in for the pirate business.

They "did the Sahara," at least, that was the way Billy put it. She said it was absurd to come to Egypt and not see a desert when there was one quite nice and handy, but she was disappointed in it when she saw it, she thought it was "too civilized"—it is true that she didn't see much of it. She saw a camel, however—it seemed an appropriate place for it—and she urged Jerry to have a ride. In a weak moment he consented.

It was a mild enough camel—as camels go—and it permitted Jerry to mount it by docilely kneeling down and laying its ugly jaw on the sand. Once he was in the saddle, however, it proceeded to take things into its own hands—figuratively speaking—staggered to its feet with the jerky movements characteristic of camels and unoiled machinery, and proceeded to stride into the desert at about six miles an hour.

"Stop!" shouted Jerry, and clutched hold of the camel's right ear, but that worthy beast, having an imperfect knowledge of English, or possibly imagining that the tug on his ear was intended to stimulate him to further efforts, increased his pace to an ambling trot. Anybody who has ever been trotted by a camel possesses a vivid recollection of it for some time. To Jerry it seemed as if he was being taken by the hair of his head and dumped down upon a singularly hard saddle at uncomfortably frequent intervals. It was a very painful progress that he made, but not a long one, for the camel's owner uttered some remark in Arabic—it sounded as if he was swearing horribly, but he was probably only calling the animal by its name—and the unwieldy beast turned and trotted back to its master. The latter was perfectly calm and unmoved, and the former had the sort of imbecile grin which

becomes diabolically expressive upon a flabby mouth which can apparently turn in every direction and is imperfectly provided with teeth.

Billy watched the undulating return of her diminutive lord and master with tears streaming down her cheeks—they were tears of uncontrollable mirth. She gazed up at the little figure perched on the top of the camel—Jerry had dropped his hat, his spectacles still remained on his nose, but they jerked up and down in sympathetic unison with the convulsive bumps of their owner.

"Oh, Jerry," she cried, "you looked lovely trotting into the Sahara. You ought to have gone on; you might have discovered something."

"I've discovered that I'm not particularly fond of this camel," replied Jerry rather crossly; "*you* try it."

So Billy did—and rather liked it.

"It's very like a churn," she said, when she got down. "Let's take one home and then we can make our own butter, and I'll ride it in the Row for exercise."

They spent a week at Algiers on their way home and did the mosques amongst other things. Jerry doing a mosque in felt slippers three sizes too large for him was always a treat to Billy. He wore a look of concentrated agony on his face as he tried to keep them on, being obviously under the impression that if he didn't he would be instantly taken out and bowstrung. On one occasion, indeed, one of his slippers did come off, and with a commendable desire to avoid polluting the mosque he endeavoured to continue his progress by hopping, by which means he nearly lost his other slipper, and conveyed the impression that he had

suddenly gone mad. Fortunately, Billy found the missing article almost at once, and thereby prevented her husband being shut up by the French Government as a dangerous lunatic.

They found no more camels at Algiers, but Billy went about in hopes of meeting an Algerian lion; however, in this she was disappointed, there not being even a circus one on view. There were plenty of donkeys though, and she and Jerry attempted a donkey ride. So far as Jerry was concerned, it was fairly successful, but as soon as Billy seated her long frame on the back of the donkey she had selected, the sensible little beast promptly sat down too and declined to move.

They didn't stay in the town of Algiers, but on the heights of Mustapha Supérieur, whence they obtained beautiful views of the Mediterranean, both from their bedrooms and from the hotel gardens. It was at this hotel one day that Jerry came out in a new light, for he burst into song. Billy knew that her husband was supposed to have a nice voice, but she had imagined this to be a more or less amiable myth invented by his family. She had certainly never attempted to investigate it—she wasn't musical—and Jerry was much too shy to volunteer to perform. The first intimation of his new-born assertiveness was when she strolled into the hotel drawing-room one afternoon and found him carolling away, with a Mrs. D'Arcy playing his accompaniments for him. They were Mrs. D'Arcy's songs, and she was transposing them at sight into a key suitable for Jerry's compass. They had the drawing-room to themselves, and Billy had never seen Jerry so much at ease with any woman before. He flushed when he saw her and

his voice quavered with nervousness. He stumbled on for a few bars and then stopped.

"Go on, Caruso," said Billy encouragingly; "don't mind me."

Her appearance had, however, quite spoilt Jerry's singing, for it made him self-conscious. Billy perceived this after a moment or two, and amiably departed into the garden—"to see if the birds were jealous," she said, after which Jerry recovered his courage and his voice.

The explanation of the incident was very simple. Mrs. D'Arcy had been trying over some of her songs before lunch and had left them lying open upon the piano. Jerry had entered the deserted drawing-room after lunch and, secure in his solitude, had attacked the easiest of them in a subdued voice, and with much fumbling of fingers and many wrong notes, for Jerry's knowledge of piano playing was distinctly elementary. Mrs. D'Arcy came into the room whilst he was thus engaged and had been first an amused and then an interested spectator—amused when she found that Jerry didn't know how to play, and interested when she discovered that he had a very fair idea how to sing. She had been about to retire as unobtrusively as she had entered when Jerry discovered her, to his dire confusion. He had made a frightened resistance when she had suggested accompanying him, but she soon overcame this, and gradually his shyness wore off under her manipulation, much as the skin of an orange lends itself to skilful peeling but remains stubborn to any other form of removal. Nobody had ever approached Jerry in this scientific way before.

Moreover, never before had his voice been given such an opportunity. On the few occasions on which

he had hitherto sung he had relied upon his sister at the piano, and Blanche's method of accompanying was to strike all the notes with complete accuracy of time and equal vehemence of touch, being quite indifferent as to what the singer might be doing. That wasn't Mrs. D'Arcy's way. She was a born accompanist; she nursed the singer, stimulated him, brought the very best out of him if he was a good performer, subdued his defects if he was a bad one. There are very few really good accompanists, and those that are good joy in their art and take every opportunity of practising it. It was a regular hobby of Mrs. D'Arcy, which accounted for the interest she took in Jerry—but he could hardly be expected to understand that. He experienced much the same pleasure as does the cat which is rubbed under the ear; like the cat he purred, and like the cat he failed to realize that people rub a cat's ear quite as much for their own satisfaction as that of the cat.

It was with quite a pang of regret that Billy and Jerry left Algiers. Mrs. D'Arcy came to see them off. She was a widow of the type that is termed fascinating or fast, according to whether the speaker belongs to the opposite sex or not. Billy hadn't formed either opinion of her, or, indeed, any at all. She returned her hand wave cordially, however, as their steamer throbbed out of the harbour. Then she gazed at the terraced houses gleaming ivory-like in the sun, and dotted here and there with their narrow windows. She turned to Jerry.

"They call it the 'White City,'" she said; "but I call it 'the City of Dominoes.' I'm sorry to leave it all; it's been very jolly, hasn't it?"

"Yes," he replied, "we've had a splendid time."

But all that had changed, as they reflected somewhat sadly whilst they stood coughing in the fog-laden hall of their new house. It might almost have been described as "their new houses," for the dining-room and the drawing-room were the only apartments which they were to occupy in common. The rest of the house had been divided up with charming impartiality between them, and their respective bedrooms and sitting-rooms bore much the same relation to each other as do the poles. The spare bedrooms, of which there were two, formed a kind of No Man's Land, which either of them might presumably colonize with temporary occupants, and the hall and passages might equally be considered the territory of neither, but through which both of them possessed rights of way.

The arrangements had been carried out whilst they were away. Thompson had represented his master, and Curtis her mistress—Billy couldn't stand the idea of travelling with a maid, and so she had left her behind. These deputies had looked after their employers' interests on rigid arithmetical principles, a task which the architect had rendered comparatively easy by departing from the manner of his kind and designing a large number of small rooms instead of a small number of large ones.

But if the architect had thus involuntarily lent his assistance, Mrs. Holroyd and Blanche had done their best to neutralize his efforts by their own. They had considered it their duty to come and superintend the preparations for habitation of the new house, and those preparations by no means had their approval. It was in vain that Thompson and Curtis explained

their instructions; their statements only caused Blanche to snort and Mrs. Holroyd to declare tearfully that they must have misunderstood them. The spare bedrooms were a constant cause of discord; they were on different floors, one on that occupied by Billy, and one on that where Jerry's apartments were situated. This equally offended Mrs. Holroyd's sense of the orthodox and Blanche's sense of order, and they united in insisting that this arrangement could never have been intended. The battle raged long on this point; it was so obvious that the spare bedrooms should be on one floor, and the other allocated to the master and mistress. Thompson, overwhelmed by superior argument, was nearly giving in, but Curtis remained firm. She insisted that her mistress had given her definite instructions. "No, she couldn't give reasons, she hadn't got any, but she'd got her orders"; and so she carried the day in the teeth of opposition.

The whole affair had resolved itself into a contest, as Curtis explained to Billy whilst she helped her out of her travelling dress, as to whether Blanche and Mrs. Holroyd could undo or prevent being done what the servants had already accomplished or were intent on doing. Mrs. Holroyd and Blanche had lost, however, because the servants were in effective occupation of the house.

Billy and her husband ate their first dinner together in their new house in a state of depressed silence. In the first place they were tired—especially Jerry—and in the second the fog made them cough when either of them essayed conversation, so they gave it up as a bad job by mutual consent. After dinner, Jerry lit a cigarette, but that made him cough also, so he threw

it away. Billy went up to her sitting-room and settled herself to read, but the fog made her eyes smart, so she went to bed; Jerry had apparently decided to do the same, for she heard the thud of his boots as he kicked them off his feet on the floor above her head—Jerry had large feet. She got into bed and went to sleep and dreamt that Jerry was being chased across the Sahara by an angry camel, and that he stopped every now and then to throw boots at the animal to keep him at bay. Where the boots came from did not clearly appear; they seemed to grow on her husband's feet as fast as he took them off, innumerable boots, great, big, heavy boots which hit the camel with a curiously wooden sound.

It was Curtis knocking at the door with the early morning tea; the fog had cleared away and the sun was shining.

A house-warming seemed imperative, so, as soon as she had settled down, Billy gave a dance. It was largely attended and was generally voted a great success, though somewhat crowded. Billy asked one of her girl friends to come up, and Jerry, not to be outdone in hospitality, invited a learned antiquary of his acquaintance up to Town, and the two spent a pleasant evening in the library discussing the relation of earthquakes to the flood, introducing a brand-new theory of Jerry's concerning the Ark, whilst Billy and her friends on the floor above endeavoured—unsuccessfully—to bring down the ceiling on their heads.

Jerry's absence was somewhat commented on. Jerry was only non-existent when present; *then* no one noticed him—but Billy explained that he was not a dancing man. He did put in an appearance with his

learned friend about supper time. The latter was introduced to a lady of mature years in spectacles, as she seemed the most fitting person present to bear the infliction. She allowed herself to be taken down to supper and fed, and endeavoured to assume an air of rapt interest whilst her companion embarked upon a complicated geological analogy with reference to the strata of a neapolitan ice.

Jim turned up and occupied as much of Billy's attention as she was prepared to give him, which was a good deal. Jim was fond of dancing, but he was not an inspired dancer; he always gave his partner the impression that he was looking where he was going.

"Your dancing is characteristic of you," said Billy; "thoroughly safe."

"Oh, I know I'm not exciting," he replied; "I have kept inside the speed limit all my life."

"Dear old Jim," she laughed; "I hear you're travelling rapidly at the Bar though."

"Oh yes, things are going rather strong—and you?"

"A 1!" said Billy; "Jerry and I hit it off just right."

She related the experiences of her honeymoon with great gusto, whilst Jim sat and listened. He was astonished, to put it mildly. He knew Billy intimately, understood her vagaries, knew that when she said outrageous things she didn't mean them, but here she was holding up her husband to ridicule, and obviously quite unconscious that she was doing anything out of the common. It apparently didn't occur to her that if her husband was an absurd person, she bore his name, that if he made himself ridiculous he made her look ridiculous too, that she was bound up in his life

and must bear the brunt of his antics, not laugh at them. Jim looked at her animated face as she described Jerry marching into the hotel encumbered with warlike weapons which he had just purchased. She obviously enjoyed recalling the incident. It was as if she were merely an interested observer watching some funny show. She was part of the show, but she didn't know it. Well, it wasn't his place to enlighten her; she would learn it soon enough. He couldn't, however, avoid a feeling of irritation at her attitude in the matter.

"You seem to regard your husband as a sort of Corner Man," he remarked, when she had finished.

She assented readily, apparently not noticing anything unusual in his tone.

"Yes," she said, "Jerry's great fun."

CHAPTER VII

The house-warming over and the house restored to something approaching order, Billy proceeded to the serious practice of her new profession of a married woman. She found it a very pleasant one. She would have felt puzzled to explain wherein lay the exact difference between her former and her present state, but a difference undoubtedly existed. Formerly she was able to do pretty much as she liked, but now she was able to do entirely so. Then she had been able to say whatever came into her head and did; she did the same now, but it was different somehow. Perhaps the change consisted more in the way her sayings and doings were received than anything else. They seemed to have acquired an added importance. She found people listening to her when she talked; it was a new experience and rather flattering. Her girl friends appeared to regard her as a person somewhat superior to themselves, as one who had solved one of the mysteries of existence; it was rather nice to be treated like that, and there was no occasion to tell them that there was no mystery at all. The absence of maternal advice and brotherly criticism also gave her an unexpected sensation of relief. She didn't realize that their opinions of her conduct possessed any weight until they were removed. Winnie also was now reduced to a sufficiently proper sense of her inferiority

to be quite a pleasant companion—her criticisms before had been completely ignored but none the less definitely expressed. Her father regarded her with the respect with which he would have looked at a sound investment which he had been instrumental in floating on the market. Jerry pursued his uneventful way, untroubled and untroubling, a useful sort of article to have about the house, and one which required no looking after. He occupied much the same position in the household as does the ownerless hat which is hung on a peg in the hall by timid maiden ladies, firmly impressed that thereby they will frighten away any enterprising burglar who may happen to call.

Take it all in all, Billy was highly satisfied with the situation, and she even found herself going out calling with a sense of pleasure which arose from a sense of added importance. Hitherto, calls had been a disagreeable task which she had avoided whenever possible, leaving those family duties to her mother and Winnie, to whom they seemed admirably suited. Then she was merely a fragment of her family; now she represented her family herself—and Jerry was the fragment. Calling had not formed an item upon Billy's projected matrimonial programme, but she found it so pleasant that she added it to the bill.

Thus, she began to enlarge her acquaintance. She and Jerry found themselves unceasingly asked out to dine and Billy usually went alone. This was, of course, highly unconventional for a recently married pair, but it speedily became accepted as a commonplace in this instance; everybody knew that Billy and Jerry got along excellently, and if one of them chose to dine with

her friends and the other at his club or at home, that was their affair.

"My husband is afraid of every woman except one, and he married *her*," explained Billy with her accustomed frankness, and the statement had the merit of sweet reasonableness to any one who knew Jerry.

Billy was fortunate in her new-found friends. Amongst them was a Mrs. Mervyn, who took a great fancy to her. Any one to whom Mrs. Mervyn took a fancy was bound to be pronounced "all right" by the people who mattered, and thereafter Billy had *carte blanche* to go as she pleased without criticism, though, needless to say, she would have done so in any case.

It is difficult to explain wherein lay the power of Mrs. Mervyn's *cachet*. She was nothing in particular, merely the widow of a colonel who had been shot in the South African War. She was not particularly well off although she managed to run an electric *coupé* and a flat at Albert Court, and the journalistic gossips displayed little or no interest in what she wore or where she went. She was, however, a person of considerable social significance, for she had the reputation *not* of knowing "everybody," but of "everybody" knowing her.

Jerry also was conscious of a sense of freedom which he had not hitherto known. It is true that in his London flat he had been able to lead the more or less go-as-you-please existence of a bachelor, but he had been periodically pulled out of his state of passiveness by his aggressively energetic sister and other relatives and shaken violently—figuratively speaking.

He had been dragged hither and thither at intervals—he was much too weak before the eagle-eyed Blanche to resist—and thrown into the arms of various girls with a view to matrimony. He used to escape back to his flat and Thompson as soon as he could, and try to forget these disturbing influences, but he knew that a repetition of them always loomed in the future, and it worried him. Now that was all over.

"I used to feel like a carpet that was being constantly taken up and beaten," he said to Blake at the club; "but now I'm nicely nailed down and can get as dusty as I like."

"And trodden on," philosophized his erstwhile best man. "You're about the rummiest beggar I know; however, you've got a nice taste in wives, and I suppose you know what's good for you."

Jerry was beginning to feel that his marriage was very good for him indeed. It is somewhat difficult to find ladies—especially young ones—with views on marriage similar to his. He had found one, however, a young one and a charming one—he was beginning to discover that Billy could be very charming when she liked—and he rightly considered himself to be a very fortunate fellow. The rigour of the contract became slightly relaxed on both sides by mutual consent; that is to say, the internal domestic arrangements grew insensibly more elastic and Jerry and Billy began to encroach upon each other's territory.

It began with Jerry inviting Billy into the library one evening on her return from a dinner, and Jerry inviting himself into her sitting-room on another occasion because he alleged that the library fire smoked. After which they dispensed with invitations and

entered these rooms as they chose, only prepared to leave them without protest if they weren't wanted.

Thus it came about that Billy went into the library as a matter of course on her way home from dinner, dance or theatre, and Jerry would look up from his fossils, or his book, or wake from his sleep and be glad to see her. He was still funny in Billy's eyes, he could hardly fail to be that—and the big carpet slippers and violently tinted smoking jacket which he wore on these occasions didn't make him less so—but she began to get quite fond of him. Of course she had always liked him or she wouldn't have married him, but it had been a very negative form of affection on her part. Now she almost looked forward to seeing him on her return home and felt that she would really miss him if he were not there, perhaps much in the same way that one misses a cat which is not in its accustomed place.

She rather objected to his smoking jacket. As has been stated, in the few articles of attire in which he was not dominated by his tailor, Jerry consulted his own individual taste, which was execrable. He had sufficient sense to keep the extravagant portions of his wardrobe for private exhibition only, and his smoking jacket was one of them—it was a sort of talking rainbow in silk and velvet. It was made by a highly respectable tailor who would certainly have disowned the article had it been worn in public. Billy once or twice made chaffing references to it, but the look on her husband's face showed her that he didn't relish them, and, after all, she reflected, it was one of the terms of their contract to mind their own business, and this was his.

But although their bargain became a slightly more

humanized affair, it still remained essentially what it was. They each pursued their separate lives, and though they were quite glad to see each other, they did so very seldom. Various circumstances contributed to this; for instance, breakfast was a solitary meal. Billy was through it and probably in the Park by the time Jerry came down to it. Lunch he usually preferred to take at his club, and she, anywhere she happened to be, perhaps at home, but more often at her golf club near Richmond, or at some place where she had been shopping, or at a friend's house. At tea they practically never met, and at dinner perhaps twice a week.

Billy got asked out all over the place in the evening, and she revelled in her independence and went. Jerry was quite content to stay at home, or occasionally put in an evening at his club. He didn't care about going out; he always shut up in the presence of feminine society like a concertina; women didn't appeal to him, and he only appealed to their sense of the ludicrous, so he wisely concentrated his energies on his fossils, which had no sense of humour, or, at any rate, were incapable of displaying it.

On the rare occasions when he and Billy did sit opposite each other at their own table, she was always prepared to talk and he was always ready to listen, so that the time did not hang heavily on her hands. Occasionally they gave a dinner party—quite a small one, for Billy was a young, untried hostess as yet. Jim was almost invariably invited upon these occasions, and Billy usually contrived to get him to take her into dinner and to see a good deal of him afterwards, which was very satisfactory so far as she was concerned, but

rather disturbing to Jim's peace of mind, for he was quite as much in love with her as ever. He endeavoured to accustom himself to the rôle of elder brother, but he could not conceal from himself that elder brothers do not customarily hunger for the society of their sisters and feel depressed in their absence. However, Jim was an honest young man, and a man's sentiments towards other men's wives possess no public interest under those circumstances.

In this way the months slipped by pleasantly and swiftly, and Billy found herself past Ascot and at the close of the season almost before she had realized that it had begun. She had really spent a very strenuous time, but her physical health enabled her to do so without particularly noticing it. However, she was quite prepared for a month's comparative quiet at Sutcliffe Park when Jerry suggested it, and accordingly the end of July saw them departing for the country. Then there certainly followed an exceedingly quiet time. Neither Lord Sutcliffe nor Jerry cared for visitors, Blanche didn't want them—there was nobody else to marry off—she didn't propose any such foolishness for herself, and there was no occasion to ask any one down to shoot anything, because there wasn't anything to shoot. Consequently, a period of stagnation set in which Billy at first found very restful and finally very dull.

It rained nearly every day, but Billy couldn't dispense with exercise, so she took long country walks over the hills, got wet through and changed her clothes when she got home. She made friends with a weak-minded sheep-dog on one of these occasions, who forthwith neglected his duties and used to accompany

her. She tried fishing in a neighbouring burn in which fish were fabled to exist but had never yet been caught, and which lived fully up to its reputation on these occasions. She attempted to read Jerry's books, but they sent her to sleep, and she essayed polishing his specimens, but she broke them. Finally, when the vicar came to tea one afternoon, she volunteered to help his daughter to get up a ladies' team to play the local cricket club, which was rather a false step on her part, as the worthy man's daughter was about forty and had a wooden leg. However, Billy didn't know that.

After that she gave it up and decided to go to Beachaven, where her people were, at the end of the month and play golf. Jerry wished to go too—he rather wanted to try his hand at golf again—so she wrote to the Grand Hotel and booked rooms.

The Sutcliffe Park visit was not, however, completely devoid of incident. As has been said, the domestic arrangements at Queen's Gate did not command the approval of either Mrs. Holroyd or Blanche. These ladies had not at first appreciated their real significance, but later the true state of affairs became more or less apparent to them. The present occasion seemed to Blanche to be an excellent one for placing things on a proper basis. She confided the first attack to her father.

Lord Sutcliffe was a man who wasted few words in speech. He hated talking, and merely used the medium of words to convey the fact that he wanted something or to thank somebody for having got it for him. He undertook his present task in his characteristic manner. He suddenly looked up from his *Times* one morning

in the smoking-room when Jerry was there and said, "Jerry, I want a grandson."

Jerry blinked his surprise.

"An advertisement in the *Exchange and Mart*," he began.

The old man continued, "Are you going to give me one?"

"Some day, I expect," said Jerry.

"I want to live to see it; I'm seventy."

"And I'm thirty—there's plenty of time."

"But your house; I hear it's divided——"

"In two, yes," said Jerry briskly; "but not against itself—that's where it differs from ordinary matrimonial establishments. It's all right, father, some day I'll give you what you want. I can't hurry the pace, I should spoil it all if I did."

Lord Sutcliffe resumed his reading with a half-satisfied grunt—it was something to know that "Barkis was willing"—he had rather feared that he wasn't. Blanche did not view the result of her father's interview in nearly so favourable a light.

"That's all very well so far as he is concerned," she said, "but what about *her?*"

"That's your affair," said Lord Sutcliffe, with the nearest approach to a chuckle of which he was capable.

Blanche accordingly tackled Billy the next day.

"How long are you and Jerry going to live this double doll's house arrangement?" she asked.

"Till death do us part," said Billy with solemn voice but laughing eyes.

"That's nonsense. You're man and wife, you're part of each other, you're one."

"Yes," said Billy, "the question is which one.

We haven't decided that yet, we must keep up the barricades until then."

"Don't be absurd, Billy, the point put bluntly is that we want an heir."

"That may be," replied Billy, "but I don't. If those are your views, you'd better do a bit of marrying yourself."

"You know perfectly well that it is to Jerry we must look; he is the only person who can have an heir, and you must give him one."

Billy began to get irritated.

"Am I to have any say in the matter?" she asked. "I think I might be allowed to run my own show."

"It isn't your own show, it's *our* show; you're one of us now," retorted Blanche, equally warmly.

"Well, I shall do as I like," said Billy.

"This isn't a case of what you like, it's what you ought to do. It's your duty."

Billy began to show signs of temper, as Blanche warmed to her favourite topic.

"We all have our different duties to perform," she said, "a man's duty is to work for his living, and then for his wife's and his children's living; a woman's duty is to look after her father's house till she's married and her husband's house afterwards, to give him children, and to bring them up as honest citizens. There's no getting away from it, that's her duty."

"Oh, damn duty!" cried Billy; "I married Jerry for inclination, not duty."

And that emphatically closed the discussion.

Billy was very glad to see Beachaven again, and Beachaven was very glad to see Billy. Jerry also found a modified welcome; it is characteristic of Beachaven

that it does not forget faces—and certainly it would have had no excuse for doing so in Jerry's case. Jerry's cup of happiness, however, became quite full when he found his former golfing companion seated in the club house as if he had never left it. They promptly sallied forth to fight their battles over again and, as in each instance their golf had become even worse than formerly, they had excellent and almost interminable matches.

The Holroyd family were again at Sunny Bank, and evinced their pleasure at seeing Billy according to their several natures—Mrs. Holroyd emotionally, Winnie excitedly, and Mr. Holroyd with substantial satisfaction. Sydney expressed his intention of searching the scriptures for a precedent in the treatment of prodigal daughters on their return and hinted that something lingering might be found with boiling oil in it. In the meantime he went out and played golf with her; he had just taken up the game and showed signs of some day being distinctly good. Billy at first gave him a half and invariably beat him badly, but he persevered and finally she had to reduce the handicap and then play her best to hold her own with him.

Occasionally she played with Jerry, but this she found very dull. Jerry, however, liked it, and Billy was a good-natured girl who was quite ready to do what people wanted her to—if it wasn't something that she particularly didn't want to do herself. So she played with Jerry, that is to say, she went round the course with him, holed out in fours and fives, and waited on the greens until he came up and solemnly holed out in anything over ten. A round with Jerry

was a lengthy operation, partly because of the number of strokes which he took from tee to green, partly because he usually lost his ball on the way thither, and partly because they had to let all the stronger players of the club pass them. These latter used to come through with many a curious glance at the funny little man who had managed to acquire such a tall, handsome mate for his wife.

Beachaven did not often see any very high-class play on its links, for the giants of the game rarely visited them. There was nobody belonging to the club behind the scratch mark, and the two or three members who had got that handicap would certainly not have been considered entitled to it on a more difficult course. It was therefore quite an occurrence when Frank Langton, plus four at Prestwick, came down to Beachaven for a few days and brought his golf clubs with him. He strolled into the club house with a view to becoming a temporary member, had a drink with the genial secretary, and looked about for some one to show him the way round the course. Sydney Holroyd was the only member in the club at the time and, not being bashful by nature, he took the stranger on at once.

Although he received a number of strokes and knew the course, whereas his opponent didn't, Sydney, in his own language, "never saw the way he went." On their way round the links they came across Billy and her husband; Jerry was ploughing up the land in his usual fashion, and Billy signalled to her brother to come through. He told her as he passed what a "fearful swell" his companion was, and Billy regarded the stranger with interest. He was a tall, fair man,

quite six feet in height, remarkably good looking, an admirable type of the athletic Englishman. He raised his cap to Billy in acknowledgment of her courtesy in letting him pass. She thought he looked an awfully good sort as he went striding by. He certainly knew how to play. She saw him walk up to his ball and regard it doubtfully; it was in a hanging lie and cupped as well—an ideally execrable combination of circumstances from the golfer's point of view. He, however, did not hesitate long; he took his brassy out of his bag—an ordinary player would have been content to have jabbed the ball out with an iron—and shortening his grip of the club struck turf and ball at the same time with a crisp downward blow. The ball seemed to leap away from the impact, straight and low it went, then kicked high in the air and dropped on to the green a hundred and fifty yards away. It was a magnificent shot played with consummate technical skill which only a golfer could appreciate. Billy would have given a lot to have been able to do it herself, and she couldn't avoid showing her enthusiasm by exclaiming "good shot." Langton turned and smiled his appreciation of her involuntary tribute. It is pleasant to be admired by attractive young women.

Then Jerry came up, and he and Billy pursued their laborious way, laborious from his point of view because he had so much to do and from hers because she had so little. She caught an occasional glimpse of the stranger driving long swinging balls down the course; he drove with a bit of a hook—perhaps the most artistic and certainly the most paying kind of ball to drive, when properly judged. She would have liked very much to change places with her brother. Jerry

would have done quite well enough for *him*, and she would have immensely enjoyed a game with the tall, fair man—she thought he would have enjoyed it too from the way he had smiled.

She, however, got no opportunity of playing with him, although she saw him from time to time during the next few days playing on the course. She began to take a great interest in him. He certainly was a superb golfer, and he also seemed to be rather a nice man. She questioned Sydney about him, but he only played with him on that one occasion, the short handicap men of the club having monopolized Langton's attention since. Then he departed in a sort of golfing halo, as he had arrived, and Beachaven saw him no more.

Towards the end of September, Billy proceeded upon a round of visits which she had promised to pay to various friends. Jerry remained on at Beachaven until about the middle of October, and then he returned to Town. He didn't notice Billy's absence to any great extent while he still stayed at Beachaven, because his golf occupied him all day and made him sufficiently tired to want to sleep all night; but when he got back to London he missed her horribly. It was then that he began to realize for the first time how much this attractive, young wife of his had entered into his life. It is true that they had only existed towards each other in the capacity of friends, that they were, indeed, two people quite independent of each other who happened to live in the same house. At least, that was the theory of the thing. But, when he found himself back in his London house without the enlivening companionship of Billy, he began to feel very dependent upon her

indeed. She seemed to have become a necessary part of his environment; unfortunately, he could not lay the flattering unction to his soul that he had become part of hers. Well, that was surely his own fault; he had never tried to become so, he had always kept himself aloof from her occupations—he had had many opportunities of sharing in them, but he had never taken advantage of them.

He reflected upon the dinners to which they had both been invited and to which Billy had gone alone, the theatres to which she had gone with her friends when she might just as well have gone with him. That was running a theory to death; there was no occasion to carry it as far as that. Moreover, that was not in the bond, but quite outside it; he and Billy were excellent friends, and there was no point in their not going about together. He reproached himself with his neglect in this respect; after all, he owed it to Billy to be her companion; companionship is one of the privileges of friends. Of course she had said nothing to him about it, he reflected; she was too good natured for that, she probably didn't like to reproach him because she may have thought that under the terms of their arrangement she was not entitled to; but she must have found it rather awkward to be obliged to explain her husband's absence from her side on so many occasions.

Again, the time might come when he would desire their relations to become a little more intimate than they were at present. He began to feel that in his case that time might be shortly; he wondered what her views were on the subject. He felt that he had grown to care a great deal more for her than when he

married her. Did she care more for him? Surely. Their constant companionship, even under existing conditions, must have resulted in that. He recalled his conversation with his father at Sutcliffe Park on the subject of an heir. That was, of course, quite outside the terms of his marriage contract with Billy. But it might be brought within them—by consent. Did he want that? He hardly knew; anyhow, as he had said, there was plenty of time for that. Still, he must make a beginning when his wife came back. He must see her more often, go about with her a bit. He was beginning to get fond of her.

In the meantime he got thoroughly bored. He didn't seem to be able to settle down to his usual occupations now that Billy was not in the house, which was curious, because each of them went their own way when she was. In despair he went out and bought some songs and tried to accompany himself on the piano in the drawing-room. That effort was a failure, for he found that he couldn't play them. Then he had an inspiration. He bought a pianola and installed it in the library together with a motley assortment of songs and pieces. He practised assiduously at his new toy, and became quite proficient and almost cheerful.

November was nearing its close before Billy returned home. She was in excellent spirits as she ran up the steps of the house. Jerry was in the hall to meet her.

"Hullo, Jerry!" she cried, "this is an honour. I didn't expect to see you till dinner-time, and perhaps not then."

Jerry stammered something or other unintelligible—he had intended to say something really nice, but it didn't seem to fit in with Billy's greeting.

Dinner passed in a vivid narrative of Billy's doings ; Jerry was quite content to sit and listen, and Billy loved to talk, so both were satisfied. After dinner Billy came into Jerry's library, " by special request," as she said. He was dressed in his ordinary dinner jacket, and had pumps on his feet and showed no inclination to change into his multi-coloured smoking jacket and carpet slippers. Billy lounged in an arm-chair regarding his comparatively tidy appearance with curiosity.

" Joseph," she said, " where is your coat of many colours ? "

Jerry blushed.

" Oh," he replied, " I've put that away—you—you said you didn't like it."

CHAPTER VIII

BILLY was rather disconcerted by Jerry's answer. She didn't quite know how to treat this sudden subservience to her almost unexpressed wishes, for, as a matter of fact, she had only once or twice ventured a passing opinion upon the now discarded smoking jacket, and it had neither been made nor, apparently, taken seriously. She was puzzling over this when she caught sight of the pianola for the first time.

"What on earth's that?" she asked.

"It's a pianola. I got so awfully lonely without you that I—— "

"Had to get a substitute," she laughed. "Well, I hope it's got more music in it than I have."

She recurred to his first remark.

"Were you really lonely without me, Jerry? That was awfully nice of you. And yet I don't see why you should have been, for we each exist separately."

"I think one gets tired of a separate existence after one's marriage."

Billy rather opened her eyes at this.

"Hullo!" she said; "what about our beautiful theories of independence?"

"Beautiful theories only remain beautiful whilst they remain theories."

"Epigram!" said Billy; "the first one I've ever heard you make. Prepare me next time."

"Don't you agree with me?"

"I decline to be subtle," replied Billy; "let's hear your old tinkler."

"Shall I—sing?" he asked.

"Rather!" she answered.

She walked up to the instrument and patted its wooden frame.

"How do you do, Mrs. D'Arcy," she said.

She turned to Jerry.

"What are you going to sing?" she asked.

"I've been practising 'The Devout Lover,'" he replied.

He proceeded to sing it. His voice quivered with nervousness when he started, but that wore off as he warmed to his work. It was not a performance to boast of from the musical point of view, for the pianola was a very inefficient substitute for Mrs. D'Arcy, added to which Jerry's control of it was by no means perfect. Billy, as has been stated, had no ear for music, but she listened attentively. She was beginning to find this little husband of hers very interesting. This was indeed a new development on his part. She was not sure that she would find it a welcome one, but, for the moment, the novelty pleased.

"Bravo!" she cried, when he had finished; "that's splendid. How do you work the old thing? Show me."

He did so, with the gusto of a mother exhibiting her first-born.

Billy sat down at the pianola and produced weird noises—she didn't know they were weird; to her unsympathetic ear all music was noise more or less, according to whether you had the loud pedal down or not.

"It seems easy enough," she said, after having wrung a more than usually frantic shriek from the tortured instrument.

"Oh, it's all right when you get used to it," said Jerry.

They passed quite a pleasant evening together, only Billy wanted to play and Jerry wanted to sing; so they compromised, and she played his accompaniments, completely drowning his contributions to the evening's entertainment.

"You don't need to be *quite* so energetic," ventured Jerry mildly, as his athletic wife worked away at what she called "the air pump apparatus" with both feet.

"It's splendid practice for biking," she replied, "and it don't seem to do it any harm; its lungs are apparently all right."

The unhappy instrument was absolutely full of air—it had certainly never been submitted to such violent treatment in the course of its existence; Jerry had never passed such a noisy evening in his life.

The next morning Billy came down to breakfast at eight as usual. To her surprise she found Jerry there as well.

"Aren't you well?" she asked.

"Perfectly," he replied, "and as hungry as a hunter."

"I've often wondered why hunters are hungry," said Billy; "I suppose it is because they don't catch anything."

She seated herself at the table and began her breakfast. It was the first meal of this kind that she

remembered taking with her husband—and they had been married over a year.

"What's the programme for the morning?" asked Jerry.

"I'm going shopping, Harrod's and Peter Robinson's, and that sort of thing."

"I'll come too, if you don't mind."

"Do," said Billy; "but I expect you will—I'm going to buy all sorts of improper things; still, I've no doubt your opinion will be most helpful."

They set out together. She didn't particularly want him, but she didn't object to his society, although she was distinctly puzzled at being honoured with it. It was such a completely new departure for Jerry. She seemed to have come back to quite a different husband to the one she had left behind her at Beachaven. She was not sure that the change was an improvement. As the morning advanced she came to the conclusion that it was not.

Her purchases were chiefly concerned with articles of feminine apparel. On these occasions she left Jerry outside the shop, and found him patiently waiting for her upon her return. The sight of her be-spectacled, sandy-haired, little husband peering into the shop windows of the establishments she entered, or waiting outside the doors when she left, amused her for a time, but after a bit she got tired of it. She felt that he was occupying the position of the pet poodle that one leaves in charge of the stalwart official outside the premises. She found herself instinctively looking for a chain. She tried to get rid of him.

"My dear Jerry," she said, "you must be quite fed up with this, trot off whenever you like."

"I'm all right," he replied cheerfully, "I like it."

That settled the matter, for she could hardly tell him that she didn't. She had him with her for practically the rest of the day. In the evening the pianola was made to go through its paces again. Jerry sang louder on this occasion—he had more confidence, and Billy played softer—she wasn't quite so keen.

The next day Billy found Jerry at breakfast again.

"This is going to become a habit then?" she said.

"Rather!" he replied, "don't you approve of it?"

She could hardly inveigh against early rising since she herself was addicted to it, and of course she had no objection to having her breakfast in his company, but it puzzled her. Jerry, however, had apparently determined to be a great deal more than a mere breakfast companion. After breakfast he came into her boudoir, where she was writing letters. She looked up rather impatiently—this was most irregular and quite outside the domestic arrangements.

"Not disturbing you, am I?" he inquired nervously.

"Not a bit," replied Billy, rather brusquely, "only don't talk please, I'm busy—answering invitations and things."

"Am I in any of them?" he inquired, after a pause.

"Oh mostly," she answered, without looking up, "but of course nobody expects you to go. I've even left off making excuses for you now; I simply say *I* shall be charmed, and let it go at that."

Jerry fidgeted uneasily on his chair.

"I think I should like to go to some of 'em too," he said.

Billy dropped her pen from sheer surprise.

"What's the matter with you, Jerry?" she asked. "I've never seen you like this before."

"Well, I'm beginning to think that I've got rather a good specimen of a wife," he replied.

"Crummy!" said Billy. "I'm not a fossil yet!"

She accepted such invitations as she was engaged upon on behalf of herself and Jerry. She was quite pleased that he should go out with her if he wished to; his habit of not doing so was, after all, not particularly desirable from her own point of view. A woman requires an escort to make her complete, even if it is a somewhat diminutive one—that is, of course, the justification for the existence of the King Charles' terrier.

So Jerry began to go out with his wife and the world was mildly surprised at first, and then became as accustomed to the presence of his quaint little figure in their dining-rooms and drawing-rooms as they had formerly been to its absence. It made no difference to Billy; her husband didn't take her in to dinner, and he didn't take up much room in the car on their way home. Billy enjoyed herself quite independently of him, and, if it gave him any satisfaction to see her doing so, she was sufficiently amiably disposed not to object. She was surprised at his having taken to this new form of enjoyment, however, and at his continuing it, but she was quite startled when he volunteered to accompany her to a dance.

"My word, Jerry!" she said, "you are going it. I didn't know you could dance. You sat out with me at the only dance I ever saw you at."

"Oh, I can dance all right, after a fashion; Blanche used to teach me—she said it was her duty."

Billy rather wished that her sister-in-law had not been quite so conscientious. However, there seemed to be no help for it, and probably Jerry would be tired to death before he got home and not want to go dancing again. As a matter of fact, Jerry enjoyed himself enormously, which was rather more than his partners did. It is quite true that he could dance "after a fashion," but it was a fashion which required plenty of elbow room—and that is a condition of things which seldom obtains in London ball-rooms. Jerry was much too short-sighted to see how to steer properly, and much too puny to be able to do so in any case with the athletically constructed cargoes of which he placed himself in charge. His dance usually ended after a couple of rounds of the room with his sitting out with an indignant and somewhat battered partner—*he* was never battered, he was too small and was effaced and shielded by his companion.

The marriage of Jerry had certainly produced a most extraordinary effect upon the little man so far as his relations with women were concerned. Formerly he had been afraid of them, tongue-tied in their presence, and fleeing from them at the earliest opportunity. But his growing familiarity with one of the sex had apparently delivered him from his fears with regard to the whole of it. Billy had, in fact, unconsciously emancipated him—Mrs. D'Arcy had also, perhaps, had a share in the change. Unfortunately, his emancipation didn't make him look less absurd; if anything, it made him appear more so.

Although he did not dance for long at a time, he

certainly created a sensation while he did so. People turned round to look at the queer little being who scampered round the room and conveyed the impression of being an educated rabbit with an ear for music. But the effect was mild compared to that produced when the time came for him to dance with Billy. He had some difficulty in finding her—she took very good care of that, but he did find her, and she went into the ball-room on his arm feeling that every one must be looking at them—as, indeed, they shortly were.

She had been dreading this dance all the evening. She had watched her husband performing with his partners, so she had some idea of what was in store for her. She couldn't help noticing the amusement he caused, and it made her angry, not on his account, but on her own. Billy hated being laughed at; like most people who can see a joke and make one, she didn't care about being the subject of it. Jerry was making her feel very annoyed this evening, for he was making himself look ridiculous, *and her*—that was where it smarted. At dinner parties or theatres his absurd appearance didn't matter and his antics were necessarily kept in check; but here at a dance amongst *her* friends, *she* was being made to look a fool. The worst of it was she felt that Jerry was quite within his rights; this was no breach of the contract, she couldn't expect him to change his face.

And here she was in the crowded ball-room, five foot ten looking down on five foot nothing—at any rate, he seemed five foot nothing then, perhaps less. She had never felt so tall, and he had never appeared so short. It seemed ridiculous to expect him to get his arm round her waist. She made an effort to induce

him to sit out on the plea that she was tired, but he wasn't to be put off that way.

"My dear girl," he said, "this is what I came for."

They began to waltz, and Billy very soon saw that she would have to take matters exclusively into her own control, for Jerry was perfectly incapable of doing anything in the steering line. Billy was a capable dancer, perhaps too energetic to be exactly graceful, but, nevertheless, possessing that grace which is the natural attribute of the physically perfect body. She whirled her little husband round the room—it was half temper, half exercise—she didn't want to talk to him, and she effectually prevented him talking to her by completely depriving him of his breath. So things progressed for two or three rounds of the room, and then Billy felt herself grow scarlet, for she discovered that her dance with her husband was evidently the event of the evening; the steering became easier, for couples left off dancing to watch; Billy ceased looking where she was going, fascinated by watching those who were watching her. A great wave of anger ran through her that she should be made a laughing-stock in this way, and she danced on, vowing in her heart that nothing should induce her to stop this dance with her husband until it was over, and that nothing should ever induce her to dance with him again. And then the catastrophe happened—she tripped over Jerry or Jerry tripped over her, and down he went, and she sat on him—and the room laughed. How could they help it?

Billy raged, but she did so internally; externally she appeared to consider the incident as amusing as those who witnessed it. She even refrained from expressing

her sentiments in the car on their way home, although Jerry gave her the opportunity by apologizing.

"I say, Billy," he remarked, "I feel most awfully sorry for having pulled you down like that."

"It was entirely my own clumsy fault," she replied, "I forgot you were there."

She spoke crossly, for she was still slightly out of temper. Ill humour was, however, a very evanescent quality with Billy, and by the time they reached the house she was her normal self again. They went into the library for a few moments before going upstairs—the servants had all gone to bed long ago.

"It wasn't bad fun, after all, was it, Jerry?" said Billy cheerily, helping herself to some soda water by way of a "nightcap"; "and I'm sure that you and I added to the gaiety of nations, so that's to our credit anyway."

Jerry smiled rather feebly.

"Yes," he said, "as a mirth-provoking effort our dance was a decided success. I think it's too good to repeat, however. It mightn't go off so well next time."

Billy poured him out a brandy and soda.

"Drink," she said, "and be merry, for to-morrow you shall dance with me again. Oh yes, you shall," she continued, "down here. We'll dodge the chairs for practice, and Thompson shall perform upon the pianola."

Jerry shook his head despondently, and Billy picked up her cloak, which had fallen on to the floor.

"Very well," she said, "if you won't laugh when I'm trying to be bright and witty I shall go to bed—oh, it's no use your saying you didn't know I was trying to be, you should have guessed."

Jerry got up to open the door for her. These little acts of politeness of his were quite recent and, from Billy's point of view, rather oppressive.

"Don't worry, old chap," she said, and then noticed that Jerry was limping.

"Hullo!" she cried; "what's up?"

"Oh, nothing much," he replied; "but I barked my shin a bit when I came down."

"Heel of my shoe, I expect," said Billy. "I know I kicked you like blazes. You poor old dear! Go right up to by-by, and I'll come to your room and bandage you with something warm."

She wouldn't listen to his protests, but bundled him off.

"Get right into bed," she said, "and shout out when you're ready."

Billy had very vague ideas as to first aid, but she armed herself with some lint, a work-basket, a bottle of Elliman's and a kettle of boiling water, and, thus equipped, proceeded to her husband's room. She kicked at the door, her hands being completely engaged; as a matter of fact, she had been obliged to put the bottle of Elliman's in the work-basket, into which it leaked with rather disastrous effect.

"Come in," shouted Jerry.

"This is most improper," said Billy, as she entered, "but it shan't occur again."

Then she saw Jerry.

He was sitting on the edge of the bed attired in his wonderful pyjamas. It was the first time that she had seen him thus arrayed, and his quaint appearance was too much for her sense of humour. It caused her to do, perhaps, the most heartless thing of her life, for

she leant against the wall and laughed until the tears ran down her cheeks, and some of the water from the kettle ran on to her foot.

That stopped her mirth.

Then she bandaged his leg.

CHAPTER IX

BILLY concluded the recital of her troubles.

"I see him at breakfast, lunch and tea," she said. "If I go shopping he comes too; he's taken to calling with me even, and he's become quite brilliant at handing tea-cake, and when he's not dining out with me he sings love songs to me with pianola accompaniment in the library."

She paused for breath.

"You seem to have discovered the perfect husband," said Jim.

He had been dining with Billy and Jerry *en famille*, and after dinner she had insisted on dragging Jim up to her own part of the house and consigning Jerry to his library.

"Perfect husband!" echoed Billy scornfully. "Listen to him!"

The somewhat asthmatic effects of the pianola—Billy's misdirected pedal efforts had rendered it asthmatic—stole upon their ears, although Billy's boudoir was a floor above and some way removed from the library.

Jim fidgeted in his seat. He was anxious about Billy. She was in an irritable mood to-night, and irritable moods weren't natural to her—at any rate, in his experience.

"I thought you said he was—er—'great fun,'" he remarked.

"So he was. I'm not complaining of Jerry as a joke, but as a husband. The fact of the matter is, Jim, I made a mistake when I married him."

"Billy!"

"Oh yes, Jim, it's so. People usually marry because they want to see a lot of each other, and then they find that they've got to take other people's husbands and wives into dinner and can only catch glimpses of each other at opposite ends of the table. That's rotten for them, but I thought that it would just suit Jerry and me. I reckoned that we might bore each other a little, but that would be all to the good, for then we should be quite glad to be at opposite ends of the table. But it hasn't worked a bit, because, you see, I don't love Jerry—it's only he that loves me."

Jim rose to his feet and flung his half-finished cigarette into the grate. It was emblematic of the temptation he was casting from him at the same time.

Then he turned to Billy, this girl whom he loved and whom his love could never have bored—he felt sure of that.

"You're an ass, Billy," he said, "and the sooner you realize it the better; what is more, you're a selfish ass and not half good enough for the man you married."

Billy laughed.

"Maybe," she said. "I certainly ought not to have married Jerry. I thought I would marry some one I could keep in order. It might have been better if I had married some one who would have kept me in order—you, for instance. You'd have done it with a nice, thick stick, wouldn't you, Jim? There! I'm

all right now, temper gone. You're a splendid tonic. Let's go downstairs and talk to Jerry—after all, he's not a bad sort."

For the rest of the evening Billy laid herself out to please—a thing she was quite capable of succeeding in if she liked. Jerry was in raptures with his handsome wife, and sang and enjoyed himself immensely, while Jim sat and smoked and watched the strangely assorted pair.

It was late when he took his leave. Billy saw him to the door.

"You're a dear old thing, Jim," she said to him, as she helped him on with his coat. "That dressing down you gave me did me a lot of good."

"I want you to be happy," he said.

He was standing on the steps and she by the open door, and the light from the hall threw her face into high relief against the darkness. To the man standing in the shadow she appeared like some fair, young goddess. Then she shut the door.

The "dressing down" may have done Billy some temporary good, but it certainly did not effect any permanent cure. Jerry's attentions continued as constant and trying as ever. He would, of course, have discontinued them had he perceived their effect upon his wife, but love is proverbially blind, and Jerry was short-sighted as well. Moreover, Billy could hardly enlighten him; the only thing that she could do was to attempt to divert his attention to something else.

"You want an occupation, Jerry," she said to him one day.

"Well," he replied, "I married you; that's occupation enough."

"Nonsense!" she retorted, "'men must work,'" she quoted vaguely.

"Oh yes, I know," he continued, "'and women must weep.' When you begin doing that I'll begin doing the other."

"Couldn't you get a directorship or something?" she suggested desperately.

"I can't even direct a letter without smudging it," he replied complacently, and there was nothing more to be said; so they went out together as usual.

"Quite a devoted couple they'll think us, won't they?" Billy had subsequently remarked.

"Well, we are, aren't we?" he queried.

Billy hardly knew how to answer this. It didn't seem quite to fit in with the terms of the contract, but it wasn't exactly barred.

She ran down to the golf club at Sheen Park as often as the weather permitted, but this was comparatively seldom. Sheen Park, like most golf clubs, was a "cock and hen" club, that is to say, its members were of the sexes to which those fowls respectively belong. As a matter of fact, it consisted of two clubs—a men's club and a ladies' club—but their premises adjoined, and one or two of the larger rooms they shared in common. Billy congratulated herself upon the fact that Jerry's enthusiasm for the game had not been sufficiently aroused to make him join the club. There, at any rate, she was free from him. It was a very good course of its order, but it had the disadvantages of a clay soil and trees, which made playing upon it a very muddy form of exercise in winter, and only its most enthusiastic members were found prepared to play under those conditions. Mabel Cartright was one

of these, and she and Billy journeyed down to Richmond (the nearest station) on these occasions, but either Mabel's zeal was not equal to Billy's or her necessity was not so great, for Billy finally found herself faced with the alternative of muddy, solitary golf or Jerry. She resigned herself to Jerry—he was cleaner.

One day she confided her woes to Mrs. Mervyn—she was having tea at her flat, and Jerry, for once, was not with her.

Mrs. Mervyn sipped her tea meditatively.

"It's a curious complaint," she said, "I don't ever remember having heard of it before. Most wives grumble that their husbands don't love them, not that they do."

"It's most embarrassing," said Billy.

She related how she had tried to keep out of Jerry's way.

"I've played golf," she said, "as long as I could stand it or get any one else to, but in this weather no one will turn out."

Mrs. Mervyn put down her cup with decision.

"You must ride in the Row then."

"It's so beastly in the rain."

"That doesn't matter. It won't do you any harm—you have to change anyway. Moreover, I don't suppose you need do it for very long—just keep it up until your husband has found something else to do besides admire you. He used to spend his time differently, didn't he?"

"Rather!" laughed Billy; "he used to go to his club."

"Well, perhaps he will again if he has nothing

else to do. Anyhow, that is the only plan I can think of."

"It's worth trying," said Billy.

The arrival of a visitor prevented further confidences. Billy learnt that her name was Lady Fairborough, and she regarded her with some interest, for she had never seen her before.

Lady Fairborough was quite young and remarkably pretty, with appealing, kittenish eyes which seemed to have a perpetual question in them, and a delicately rounded little figure. She was as dainty as a piece of Dresden china and apparently as fragile, obviously a woman unfitted for the strenuousness of existence, and seemingly one who had always floated upon the calms of life untroubled by disturbing currents—but strangely silent. This reserve of Lady Fairborough struck Billy as being rather curious. Somehow it didn't seem quite natural, because she who was so silent appeared to be designed by nature to laugh and chatter. She was very nice though. Billy liked her. Lady Fairborough didn't stop long. Billy was sorry, because she would have liked to know her better, and, indeed, the mere sight of the little woman gave her pleasure—Billy liked to look at pretty things. Mrs. Mervyn made no attempt to restrain her guest going, rather to Billy's surprise. She turned to Billy to explain as the door shut behind Lady Fairborough.

"Poor dear," she said, "it would have been unkind to keep her; she was frightened of you."

"Dear me!" laughed Billy, "am I as terrible as all that? I liked her awfully; I thought she was charming, though very quiet."

"She was the liveliest woman in London a couple of years ago—she was a Mrs. Granger then."

"Mrs. Granger?" repeated Billy, puzzled, for the name seemed familiar to her. Then she stiffened involuntarily. "Wasn't Mrs. Granger—divorced?" she asked.

"Quite; don't you remember the case? Fairborough was the co-respondent, you know."

"And then Lord Fairborough married her?"

"Yes, as soon as the decree was made absolute."

"But——" Billy paused confused, an unusual emotion for her. She had been about to ask how it was that the divorcée was on calling terms with Mrs. Mervyn, but an unaccustomed discretion restrained her tongue. Mrs. Mervyn, however, guessed her unspoken thought.

"You're surprised that she should come here—under the circumstances?" she said; "poor Madge, she's finding her way back."

"Finding her way back? I thought you—couldn't."

"Some people can't, most people don't, but a few people do. Of course, it's always a difficult road, hard and steep, and I don't think things are ever quite the same again; still——"

"Still there is a way back, provided you can get a sufficiently good pilot?" put in Billy. "I'm not emotional, but I should like to kiss you," she added; "I think you're a brick. You lead and others follow."

"Well, Madge Granger is a very old friend of mine, and so is Fairborough, the man she ought to have married but didn't. Her married life was a regular tragedy—her husband drank, and—well, there was

just one way out and she took it. Of course it was very wrong and all that, but Fairborough married her, took her away for about a year and now—there is an opportunity for people to forget that Lady Fairborough and Mrs. Granger are one and the same person. I'm not pretending that she can ever quite find herself again, there will always be some people who will not be able to forget, or rather, who will insist on remembering; then, her presentation was cancelled and that is always rather a nasty knock, but London is a city of many circles, and they are *not* concentric ones."

Billy stared into the fire without speaking. Mrs. Mervyn was appearing to her in a new light. Hitherto she had regarded her as a very charming acquaintance whom it was both desirable and pleasant to know, but now she was figuring as something more. It was rather a noble thing that she was doing, this piece of salvage work; there is no difficulty in finding somebody willing to cast the first stone, but it is quite another matter to find any one ready to alleviate the suffering of her at whom it is cast—and Mrs. Mervyn had a reputation to lose. She was using it to cover her friend as the kind-hearted wayfarer might use his cloak to cover a shivering child. Of course, she could afford to do it, but how many people's actions are measured by their resources? She was one of the few women, too, who could not only afford to give their assistance, but whose help would be effective, for people would follow Mrs. Mervyn's lead—in time, slowly, shyly, unwilling to commit themselves, but still more unwilling to lose any credit for a good action which somebody else had taken the risk of initiating and which

was apparently destined to turn out profitable. We are all dividend hunters.

Presently Billy rose to go.

"Good-bye, you dear Pilot," she said; "please enrol me amongst the crew."

"That's dear of you, Billy," replied Mrs. Mervyn; "I want all the help I can get."

Billy proceeded to put Mrs. Mervyn's plan into operation, and every morning, when it wasn't absolutely pouring, saw her in the Park. It was certainly rather awful in the rain, but the exercise was stimulating, and it wasn't always wet. When it was fine, she sometimes came across Lady Fairborough, also riding. She had struck up a warm friendship with the pretty little woman, and their morning rides did much to increase and cement it. They were a striking contrast on their horses—Lady Fairborough was a graceful rider though not a particularly good one, and Billy was a good rider, but not a particularly graceful one. Billy was rather an aggressively long-legged young person on a horse, and somewhat angular in the management of her elbows; she was so perfectly confident of remaining on her mount that she was careless how she sat it. Lady Fairborough, on the contrary, sat her mount and did nothing else.

Billy began to congratulate herself upon the success of her tactics. She had certainly found a way of escape from her troublesome husband. He attempted a mild remonstrance at her daily rides in all sorts of weather, but Billy promptly brushed it aside, saying that she must have exercise. After which he apparently reconciled himself to the loss of her company during the morning, though he still availed himself of it at

breakfast, and even lunch. Billy was curious to know how he occupied himself during the morning, and she asked him once or twice what he had been doing, but she found him strangely evasive.

Thus the time passed away pleasantly enough until wet days gave place to fine ones, the air became permeated with the freshness of spring, buds began to appear on the trees of the Park, and the increasing numbers of people hovering by the green chairs and sometimes venturing to sit upon them in spite of the east wind, proclaimed the approach of the London season.

Billy's rides with Lady Fairborough became a matter of daily practice, with occasional intervals for golf. The rehabilitation of Lady Fairborough had proceeded almost more rapidly than could have been expected. This was, of course, chiefly due to Mrs. Mervyn, but Billy was able to take a certain amount of credit to herself in the matter as well, for she had ably seconded Mrs. Mervyn's efforts. Lady Fairborough was speedily recovering her former sprightliness and Billy found her to be a delightful companion. She liked these morning rides immensely, and regularly looked forward to them. She chuckled as she turned her horse homewards—she had certainly found an excellent alternative to Jerry. What a lucky thing it was that here, at any rate, she possessed a refuge whither he could not follow her! She didn't dislike him, but a little of his society went a long way; he tended to bore her, and Billy hated being bored. She felt that if she had not managed to escape from his assiduous attentions she would have grown actually to dislike him. As it was, she could put up with him

very well ; after all, one must take the rough with the smooth. As a matter of fact, she hadn't much to complain of, she admitted to herself, and she really had no right to quarrel with Jerry because he liked her society better than she liked his. She lingered in the hall for a moment preparatory to going upstairs to change for lunch, and, as she did so, Jerry's latchkey turned in the door and he came into the house. Billy turned to greet him.

"Hullo!" she cried, and then she stopped—Jerry was resplendently attired in a hunting stock, shepherd's plaid riding breeches of a violent pattern, and riding boots which made his legs look like a pair of lead pencils ; he carried a truculent-looking hunting-crop in his hand, and a bowler hat on his head at a knowing angle.

"What on earth have you been doing?" she gasped.

Jerry fingered his moustache complacently. "I've been taking riding lessons," he said.

CHAPTER X

BILLY met him at her golf club.

"Billy, let me introduce Mr. Langton to you," said Mabel Cartright; "he's my cousin."

Billy looked up and found herself face to face with the good-looking stranger she had seen playing golf at Beachaven the year before.

The recognition was mutual.

"You don't mean to say that you know each other!" cried Mabel.

"Well—almost," said Billy. "You're the man I saw hitting such clinking long balls last year at Beachaven, aren't you?" she added, turning to him.

"And you're the girl who I saw making some pretty useful pushes as well," he replied, laughing.

They were friends at once, both of them so similar in characteristics, with their long, athletic frames and their frank, slangy conversation. As Billy said—"there were no frills on her,"—and she certainly found none on him.

It was a fine afternoon in May and the Sheen Park Golf Links were beginning to look almost summery. Billy had again taken refuge in golf, for the idea of riding with Jerry in the Row did not appeal to her. She had done so on one occasion, but it was not an experience that she wished to repeat in a hurry. Jerry, imperfectly seated upon his horse and clad in what she

termed his "ossy clothes," made her feel as if she was a circus lady being accompanied round the ring by the clown—an impression which also seemed to prevail amongst the occupants of the chairs and the loungers by the rails. It was like that dance, only worse.

She had regretted giving up her morning rides very much, and Jerry was, needless to say, greatly disappointed. The weather, however, was now behaving itself with beautiful propriety, and golf under those conditions approached to the ideal at Sheen Park, so that Billy felt that her fate was not so very hard after all. Her meeting with Langton was a great surprise to her.

"I didn't know you were a member of the club," she said.

"I'm not," he answered; "I'm merely a visitor. I'm thinking of joining, though, because I've just taken a studio at Kensington and this place is awfully handy from there. I'm an artist, you know," he added parenthetically.

Billy looked at him with increased interest.

"You don't look a bit like an artist," she said critically.

"How ought an artist to look?" he inquired.

"You ought to have a beard and wear a flabby sort of tie with a ring through it and—and you ought to look a bit flabby yourself."

He laughed, and his cheerful white teeth excused the lack of repartee; Langton was not brilliant—he was too healthy.

They strolled down to the tee where Mabel and her partner were waiting—Billy was partnered with

Langton. Mabel had managed that—"I prefer to play with other people's cousins," she had said.

Billy and Langton had to give their opponents a good many strokes on handicap and, under ordinary circumstances, would even then have beaten them fairly easily. In this particular instance, however, they were hard put to it to hold their own, for Langton was unable to show his true form owing to his not knowing the course. Thus it happened that they were "all square" at the seventeenth hole and the match depended upon which side should win the eighteenth. Mabel and her partner were receiving a stroke at this hole, so that their chances seemed rosy, especially so when Langton, whose drive it was, hooked his ball badly on to the bank of a half-brook half-ditch with an overhanging bramble bush between it and the green.

Mabel walked up her partner's much shorter but also much straighter drive, and, stimulated by the knowledge of her opponents' misfortunes, "approached" neatly and accurately on to the green.

Billy went to her ball and contemplated it sadly. It was lying on mud just clear of the brook, which gurgled past it. It seemed a fairly hopeless position. Langton came and had a look at it.

"You can't play that," he said; "pick it out."

"And lose a stroke and all chance of the match!" cried Billy indignantly; "not much! I'll have a bang at it, anyway."

And she did.

It wasn't exactly an elegant position that she assumed and it couldn't have been a comfortable one. She had one foot on the bank in soft mud and the other in three inches of water. Moreover, the overhanging

bramble twigs kept on getting entangled with the tam-o'-shanter she was wearing. She wasn't thinking of comfort, however. She had got her eye on a gap in the hedge in front; the odds were enormously against it, but if by any chance she could get her ball through it, the hole might be saved yet. She took her niblick and struck with all her strength, and the one in a hundred chance came off; the ball leapt up midst a splutter of mud and water, and, as if seeking to avoid a repetition of such an uncomfortable experience, flew through the opening and landed on the edge of the green. Billy's club followed through into the bramble bush with the impetus of the stroke, and the twigs sprang back and lashed her viciously in the face. She didn't notice the smart, however, nor that some of the flying rubble had struck her mouth and made her tooth bleed, and she ignored the fact that one of her eyes was bunged up with mud and water. She sprang out of the ditch excitedly.

"Hurroo!" she cried; "victory or Westminster Abbey!"

Langton came up to her, very concerned at her plight, but she wouldn't pay any heed to him.

"We'll talk about that afterwards," she said; "let's finish the game first."

Langton glanced at her admiringly. This modern young Amazon appealed to him enormously. He concentrated his attention, however, upon the serious business in hand, that of saving the match, which Billy's remarkable shot had rendered possible. Both balls were lying on the green, but that of Billy and Langton was some twenty yards from the hole, whilst their opponents' was some ten yards nearer and they

were receiving a stroke into the bargain. Mabel's partner was not likely to hole his put, but he would almost certainly lay his ball "dead," so that to halve the match Langton had to hole out.

He was very anxious to make a shot worthy of Billy's effort, and he took a good deal of trouble about it, carefully studying the lie of the ground and the line to the hole. Billy watched him, but she made no suggestions—she imagined that her partner was not "plus four" at Prestwick for nothing.

And she was right, for he holed out.

Holing out at twenty yards has undoubtedly a considerable element of luck in it, but there are two things a capable player can do—one is to start the ball on the right line to the hole, and the other is to hit it hard enough to get there. Langton's ball was "in the whole way," as golfers say, not a hesitating, sneaky shot that just crawls up to the hole and drops in, but a firm, true hit that went boldly for the "back of the tin," almost jumped the hole, changed its mind and disappeared with a triumphant wriggle.

The others holed out in two, and the match was halved with the stroke.

Then Langton turned his attention to Billy, who was certainly looking rather battered.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Rather classical, but chiefly hungry," she replied; "it was Polyphemus who only had one eye, wasn't it?"

She washed herself into comparative respectability, however, in about ten minutes, and displayed great absorptive power in regard to buttered toast when they sat down to tea in the club house. After

which she and Langton proceeded to discuss the subjects they had in common, which seemed to consist of nearly every known form of violent exercise.

"You two are dreadful," complained Mabel, "and your conversation positively makes my muscles ache."

They left the club house and strolled about the grounds. Langton enjoyed himself very much. He lit his pipe and puffed away and listened to Billy, whilst she, on her part, found this tall, fair man a very pleasant companion. They all went home by the same train, which dropped them at different stages of its journey.

Langton gathered up his clubs at Earl's Court.

"I change here," he said, "and go on to High Street."

"Good-bye," said Billy; "mind you join Sheen Park."

"I'm going to," he replied, "and I hope you'll let me play with you occasionally."

"You bet!" said Billy.

She returned home in high spirits. She considered that she had had a most successful day. She had got her feet wet, half-blinded herself, and almost lost a tooth—but there had been compensations for these slight drawbacks.

She liked Langton.

The vista of future strenuous matches with her companionable, able-bodied acquaintance formed a very pleasant prospect to her mind, and she felt amiably disposed towards all the world in general when she got home, including Jerry. She was bubbling over with good humour, and even refrained from laughing when he related how that morning the policeman

on duty in the Row had warned him against furious riding—whereas it was his horse that was temporarily running away with him in playful exuberance of high spirits.

"I hope you didn't fall off?" she said.

"Rather not," replied Jerry proudly. "They told me at the riding-school that I had a natural seat. I think there's something in it," he added seriously.

"Yes," said Billy, with forced gravity, "I expect you were born with it."

"And what sort of day have you had?" he asked.

"Oh, quite nice," she answered carelessly.

"I've been thinking that I should like to take up golf again——"

"You mustn't become too athletic," she interrupted; "you've got the Row."

"I'm seeking for fresh worlds to conquer."

"My dear Jerry," said Billy—the suggestion of golf did not appeal to her agreeably—"you mustn't overdo yourself—you're not Alexander the Great, or whoever it was; you're Jerry the little."

He ignored her remark, which was not quite a kind one, but Billy's good humour was vanishing rapidly.

"What about Sheen Park? Couldn't I join that? Then I could play with you?"

"You'd hate it," said Billy; "it's much too difficult a course for you. It's quite a different thing to pottering round a tuppenny-ha'penny course like Beachaven—besides, it's very crowded."

"You seem to get on all right," he objected.

"That's quite a different thing; I'm used to it."

"Well, I can get used to it too."

Billy got up irritably. She wasn't going to stand this at any price.

"You don't play well enough yet; that's the long and short of it. Wait till we go out of Town. We'll go down to Beachaven and you can get some practice, then we'll see about it."

"I should rather like to have a look at the place, anyhow," said Jerry.

"That's easily managed. I'll take you down with me one day and stand you tea."

Billy was so pleased at his not persisting in his original idea that she gladly made this concession—moreover, it was a very vague one.

Jerry was not quite satisfied yet.

"You see, Billy," he said, "I don't see much of you now that you've given up riding with me."

"I haven't given it up," she replied, "although I agree that I haven't done it of late. I'll go with you to-morrow if you like," she added with inspiration.

Jerry beamed his satisfaction.

"Do," he said; "that will be delightful."

She went riding with him the next day; what is more, she gave him a good deal of her society whilst they were in the Row, instead of careering about on her own, as she usually did, and merely joining him at intervals. She felt that she was paying the price of future liberty, and that she had better make a good job of it while she was about it. Jerry was in the seventh heaven at this newly acquired companionship of his wife, and he flushed with pleasure when she congratulated him upon the progress he had made in riding.

"It would be a thousand pities if you were to chuck

it now that you're getting on so well," she remarked with subtle cunning and an uneasy feeling of meanness.

"Yes," he assented, "I think perhaps you're right after all. Golf and riding is rather overdoing it."

Billy continued to emulate the alleged wisdom of the serpent by adopting a method of judicious compromise, that is to say, she played golf at Sheen Park for four or five days a week and gave her husband the benefit of her company in the Park on the remainder. She began to feel a sense of totally unmerited virtue.

Langton joined the club and played frequent matches with her, increasingly frequent as time went on, which was very pleasant for him—and her. Jerry, too, was quite pleased at the altered state of affairs.

So that every one was satisfied.

CHAPTER XI

THERE was one thing that Billy had overlooked. That was that increased amiability towards the person who loves you is apt to cause that person to imagine that you love him. Jerry was not a conceited man, but he was getting very much in love with Billy, and he was trying to make her reciprocate. The subject on which his father had spoken to him as a matter of policy had now become with him a matter of desire. He had long wished for closer relations with his wife—and she had been very nice to him of late. He was very diffident about taking the first step, but he reflected that it was his part to do so. He made several ineffectual efforts to bring the conversation into a more tender channel than was customary between himself and Billy, but they were not very successful, for he only succeeded in making her laugh.

As a matter of fact, she hadn't the slightest idea of what he was driving at. When she discovered, it quite startled her. She brushed aside his suggestions, however, in her characteristic way.

"*Liberté, égalité, mais pas maternité*," she chanted. "Them's my sentiments. I've put 'em in my worst French because they sound better that way than in English."

Jerry, however, had taken the plunge.

"That contract of ours was a mistake, Billy," he said; "I wish we hadn't made it."

"Thanks," said Billy; "why don't you say at once that you're sorry you married me. Don't mind the feelings of a feeble woman."

"You know I don't mean that—I mean that we didn't foresee that we might get to care for each other."

"My dear Jerry, I shouldn't have married you if I hadn't cared for you. Apparently you did marry me under those circumstances. I've been a neglected wife and didn't know it. I'm a poor deluded thing, and I shall go back to my mother."

Jerry was not to be put off by chaff.

"I want an heir," he said.

"I'm not keen on heirs," she replied; "as the lawyers say, we're at issue on that point. Remember the bond, the whole bond and nothing but the bond."

"Oh, blow the bond! We've broken it long ago. It's a very ragged bit of parchment now."

"It has got a bit torn," she admitted; "but some of the clauses remain, and the signatures are still there."

She upset her claret and emptied the salt cellar on the stain.

"Billy, her mark!" she laughed. "I quite admit," she continued, "that we've varied the contract a bit, made concessions here and there, and not lived as per programme in icy isolation; but don't let's go in for overcrowding."

"I wish you'd be serious," he protested. He looked very serious himself, and when Jerry looked

serious he looked comical. Billy restrained her mirth with an effort, but her lip quivered and her eyes danced.

"I'm surprised at you, Jerry," she said demurely, "to spring this on me like this. I'm only hiding my outraged modesty under a cloak of jest."

Jerry sprang to his feet in the marionette-like way he had when excited.

"I love you, Billy," he said; "*really* I do."

"I know," she replied; "it's quite sweet of you—and perfectly ridiculous."

She noticed his disappointed look and hastened to soften the blow by good-natured procrastination—her usual way.

"Some day, perhaps," she said, "but not yet. We're both young and there's heaps of time."

He came over to her.

"Some day?" he said. "You really mean it."

"Of course I mean it," she answered. She rose from her seat quickly. Jerry had looked as if he was going to kiss her, and she was sure she would laugh if he did, so she avoided the catastrophe by judicious retreat.

Billy's conduct may have appeared heartless, but there was something to be said for her. She was not in love with Jerry, had never been, and could never be. Moreover, she was blessed—or cursed—with a keen, perhaps a distorted, sense of the ludicrous, and no woman with a sense of humour ought to marry a ridiculous husband. Jerry was ridiculous in her eyes—there was no gainsaying that—and of late he had seemed more so than ever; perhaps that was due to his growing lover-like attitude, perhaps it was due to the contrast he presented to Frank Langton.

Billy played golf with Langton very often now, in fact, practically every time that she went to Sheen Park, and no longer in foursomes—ordinary matches in which they weren't bothered with partners were much more interesting. People began to talk about it after a time—not that it takes much to start people talking. As a matter of fact, there was no harm in it; Billy and Langton played together because they liked each other and could give each other a good game. Of course he was much better than she was, but her play was much nearer his form than a woman's usually is to a man's, and that fact deprived the affair of any sinister meaning—though of course it couldn't prevent people talking. Their friendship was a purely innocent one, merely the frank comradeship of two physically healthy young people with many interests in common. They might have been brothers. In their own slangy phraseology they were "pals." The fact that one of them was a man and the other a woman didn't affect the situation at all so far as they were concerned.

It did affect the situation, however, so far as other people were concerned. Even Mabel, who was by no means strait-laced, chaffingly protested to Langton one day.

"You are thick, you two!" she said. "Fortunately, I know Billy is not of the spoony variety or I should think you were trifling with her affections."

"Or she with mine," replied her cousin. "As a matter of fact, we're much too busy deciding whether I can give her a third or not to think about anything else."

Perhaps the way in which Billy and Langton arrived at the stage of calling each other by their christian

names formed the most conclusive proof of the innocence of their relationship. It happened one day when they were playing together—Billy had just made her shot, and Langton was about to make his, when, instead of doing so, he stooped and examined his ball.

"Oh, Billy, you silly ass!" he cried, "you've played with the wrong ball."

"Awfully sorry, Frank," she replied; "I'll fetch it back."

Then it occurred to both of them simultaneously that this was an unusual form of address, and they laughed in chorus—but they continued the habit.

Mabel soon noticed it.

"Nice goings on!" she cried—Mabel, like most of Billy's friends, was a bit slangy herself—"Extra Speshul! The Hartist and the Lady, Scandal in 'igh life, hall the details. I don't think I ought to know either of you any more; I come of a respectable family."

"It's your own fault," said Billy; "you introduced me to him—and, anyhow, he started it."

"And mighty indignant you were, weren't you?" put in Langton; "especially when you found you'd played with the right ball after all."

"Well," remarked Mabel sententiously, "the golfing maxim to 'keep your eye on the ball' has a good deal of rudimentary morality in it."

"Would you mind saying that again quite slowly?" said Billy politely; "I should like to write it down."

"Oh," said Mabel impatiently, "you're a pair of silly children"—she was considerably younger than either of them—"and you both ought to be smacked and put in the corner."

She looked at their long forms extended in deck chairs—Mabel was somewhat *petite* herself.

"As that cannot be done conveniently," she added, "you'd better run away and play."

"Come with us," said Langton, "and make a Three Ball!"

"No, thanks!" said Mabel. "I'm particular about the company I keep. I still have a reputation to lose."

She settled herself comfortably in the chair Billy had vacated.

"I shall stay here," she said, "until I can find a nice young man of my own. But I shall *not* call him by his christian name, and I shall not allow him to call me by mine—unless," she added meditatively, "he is very nice indeed."

Billy and Langton sauntered off to the tee, smacked two balls with vigour and accuracy down the centre of the course and proceeded to enjoy their game and each other's society.

Their apparent attitude to each other has been mentioned—that is to say, the attitude apparent to themselves. As to whether that was the real one may perhaps be open to doubt. Were they simply two sexless beings drawn into each other's society by mere community of interests? We are told that sexless beings once existed, or rather, beings endowed with the attributes of both sexes, and latter-day cynics may be found to affirm that the day is rapidly approaching when the world will be inhabited by people with the attributes of neither. But that day is not yet. And anyway, neither Billy nor Frank Langton could properly be placed in either such biological category.

They were not in love with each other—yet. That much may be asserted. Love tends to eat away the self-esteem of the man or woman it attacks, and there was no sign of any wasting away in that direction on the part of Billy or Langton. They were both thoroughly satisfied with each other and themselves, which is a very excellent state of affairs while it lasts.

There was a good deal of the mutual admiration society principle in their friendship. Billy admired Langton because he was physically a fine man and played better golf than she could ever hope to do, and Langton very naturally admired her because she admired him. A man who thinks a good deal of himself will naturally think a good deal of a woman who shares that opinion—especially if she is a pretty one. But it would not be fair to Langton to suggest that he was a mere passive object of homage who liked the process. He was a fairly active worshipper himself—and Billy was a comely goddess. She attracted him enormously, she seemed to draw the best out of him—what he thought the best, that is to say, he found he always made a good show in her company, and the anticipation of her cheerful "good shot" put him on the top of his game.

As a matter of fact, it is idle to speculate further as to the stage at which the emotions of these two had at present arrived, for they hadn't arrived at any. They were on the way, however, to some destination at present unknown and unsuspected.

Billy still continued to see a good deal of Jim, for he dined intermittently at Queen's Gate. She was awfully fond of Jim, she had a tremendous respect

for him—she didn't admire him; but then Jim wasn't brilliant, only honest. Jim never flattered her, in fact, he was uncomfortably direct in what he said. That is probably why she respected him.

She didn't respect Langton a bit, but then she admired him very much. He did flatter her, his preference for her society above all others did that. Oh, Billy!

She didn't know she felt flattered. That was the weak joint in her armour.

So things went on until well into July.

Billy and Langton were finishing their round one hot afternoon and looking forward to the tea which awaited them at the club house. Billy wasn't playing very well—it was too hot, and they had started directly after lunch and got the full force of the sun. Langton beat her fairly easily in consequence—four up and three to play.

"Let's walk in," said Billy, "and have another round after tea."

He assented readily.

"I think we were a pair of lunatics to come out in the sun—no, it's the moon that affects them, isn't it?" he corrected.

Billy lazily climbed the club steps without answering. The veranda was deserted except for a man apparently peacefully sleeping under the shade of a newspaper. Langton followed her.

"My dear Billy," he said, "I made a special effort to make that joke."

"My dear Frank," she replied languidly, "I didn't know it was one. Go and order tea like a dear thing—lots of it."

Then the man who was apparently asleep put down his paper. It was Jerry.

"I came to have tea with you, too, Billy," he said. For once Billy lost her head.

"Hullo, Jerry!" she said, "let me introduce—er—Mr. Langton."

And for once Jerry rose to the occasion.

"How do you do—er—Mr. *Frank* Langton," he said.

None of them enjoyed their tea.

CHAPTER XII

DINNER was a silent meal at Queen's Gate that night. There was a state of tension between Billy and Jerry as they faced each other across the table. It had existed during their triangular tea at Sheen Park, it had continued during their journey home together in the train, and it was somewhat increased, if anything, now that they were alone together.

Jerry was jealous. There could be no doubt of that. He had grown to love his wife, and he wanted her all to himself. He grudged the time that she spent away from him. That was why he had suggested joining Sheen Park. Well, she had put him off that, much to his disappointment, and he had acquiesced, though reluctantly. He had indeed been rather touched by her solicitude about his "not overdoing it." It had seemed to be a sign that she was growing fonder of him. But his meeting with Langton had quite upset his apple cart.

He had invited himself down to Sheen Park to tea as a sort of pleasant surprise to Billy. He had certainly been a surprise, though not apparently a pleasant one. Moreover, his normally self-possessed wife had appeared singularly ill at ease at their meeting, and consequently all sorts of unpleasant ideas began to creep into Jerry's mind—which was, after all, a shallow one. He took an immediate dislike to Langton, and the more

he thought about the matter the more he disliked him.

He thought about the matter a good deal. During tea and on his way home, and after he got there, he continued turning things over in his mind. He recalled the amount of time which Billy had recently spent at Sheen Park, the strenuous resistance which she had made to his going there, and the curious fact that, when he did turn up one day unexpectedly, he should discover her on terms of exceeding intimacy with a man of whom he had never heard before. He recognized him, of course, as the man whom he had seen playing golf at Beachaven the previous year, but he had never spoken to him until Billy introduced him at tea, nor did he know that she had ever done so. He would have thought nothing of it had it not been for her secrecy about the matter, but Billy was so communicative concerning all she did that her concealment upon this occasion acquired a significance in his eyes which it otherwise would not have possessed.

Billy also did some thinking. Metaphorically she kicked herself. She felt that she had put herself into a false position without any occasion whatever. There was no reason in the world why she should have kept Jerry in the dark about Langton. Had she kept him in the dark? Well, she hadn't mentioned him. Why should she mention him? Unfortunately she couldn't think of any other instance of forgetfulness on her part. She racked her brains unavailingly in the attempt, and grew irritable in consequence. And then her clumsy introduction of him as "Mr. Langton," when she knew Jerry had heard her call him "Frank." She must have completely lost her nerve. But what nonsense! She

had nothing to lose her nerve about. Everything was straight and above board—really, in spite of appearances. She was a free agent by the terms of her contract. Besides, fancy losing one's nerve on account of Jerry! She kicked herself with still greater metaphorical energy.

She told herself with considerable emphasis that she was absolutely in the right. What business had Jerry to come down to Sheen Park and disturb her pleasure? She had invited him? But that was a long time ago, and she had never meant him to come. Why hadn't she meant him to come? Because he wasn't wanted; she couldn't always have him hanging on to her skirts. Besides, she gave him a good deal of her time as it was—in the Row. To keep him quiet? Well, what of it? It was very amiable on her part anyhow, she needn't have done it.

In spite of her self-communings Billy was not quite comfortable. She knew that she had been trying to deceive Jerry, and she had the unpleasant feeling of having been found out. It made her angry with herself and him, and she didn't enjoy her dinner a bit—which was very unusual for her.

She watched the sulky face of her husband. She knew that he was dying to talk about Langton, but hadn't the courage to begin. She resolved not to give him any opportunity if she could help it. She thought that the best way to prevent him talking was to talk herself. She usually had plenty of topics of conversation at her command, but now that she wanted them particularly she found that she had curiously nothing to say.

"Did you ride this morning?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Lady Fairborough out?"

"No."

That seemed to exhaust that subject. What on earth was there to talk about? Clearly she must pass the lead. Jerry led from his long suit. He stimulated his nerve with a preliminary glass of port.

"About that fellow Langton?" he said.

Billy helped herself to a cigarette—she rarely smoked.

"What of him?" she asked.

"You seem to know him pretty well?"

"I do."

"You've never spoken about him to me."

Billy let the smoke from her cigarette trickle through her nostrils before answering.

"Why should I?" she inquired.

Jerry blinked with nervous anger.

"I think you might have," he said.

"Oh yes," said Billy; "I might have. I might keep a diary of what I do during the day, and read it to you at night, but I don't."

"I suppose you like him very much?"

"Who? Mr. Langton?"

"Why not call him *Frank?*"

Jerry jerked out the question with a sudden spiteful emphasis which quite startled Billy. She had never seen him like this before—the little man had gone pale in the face with anger, not red, as most people do. She felt that she must take her stand now and at once.

"I shall call him what I like, when I like," she replied with intentionally provocative calmness.

"And see him when, where, and as often as *he* likes, I suppose," bubbled Jerry furiously.

The time had obviously arrived for Billy to teach her husband his place.

"I know you can't help being ridiculous," she said; "but you needn't be a cad."

She rose from her seat and walked to the other end of the room. She leant against the mantelpiece and regarded Jerry, still seated at the table. He seemed smaller and more insignificant than ever as he sat under the glare of the electric light, whilst the shadow in which she stood on the contrary served to increase her height. She was now thoroughly angry, and she had no intention of sparing him. His anger, on the other hand, was fast evaporating after his last petulant splutter. He looked like a dejected little animal which knows that it is going to be whipped, and certainly Billy intended to perform the operation thoroughly.

"Now, listen to me," she said; "I married you on the distinct understanding that we minded our own business. You've got no right to audit my accounts."

"I'm not suggesting——" he began, but she brushed aside his interruption impatiently.

"That's exactly what you *are* doing. Now you've got to understand once and for all that I am as much entitled to go my own way and to have my own friends as you are."

"Women friends?" he queried. "May I have them?"

"Certainly," she snapped. "If you can get them!"

It was a nasty lash and she intended it to hurt. It had an unexpected effect upon Jerry, however, for it stung him into a temporary show of courage.

"Thanks," he said, "I have some regard for the position of my wife if she has none for that of her husband."

In spite of his physical shortcomings he looked really dignified for the moment.

"Then don't spy on her actions," replied Billy with an unpleasant little laugh.

"I wasn't spying on your actions. I didn't know there was any occasion to."

Billy lost her temper completely. She walked up to him with her eyes blazing.

"And now?" she said, and waited.

He looked up at her towering above him, and then all his dignity, and his courage, and his anger crumpled up.

"You *are* my wife, you know," he murmured feebly.

"Yes," said Billy; "that's just it. I am your wife. I'm not your hat or your pianola. You seem to think I'm a bit of furniture that you can do as you like with. Well, you're wrong."

He wasn't quite done yet.

"A wife owes a certain amount of duty to her husband," he began vaguely, but Billy interrupted him.

"This wife doesn't. I suppose you'll say next that I promised to love, honour, and obey you."

"Well—you did, you know," he replied.

"Oh," cried Billy furiously, "that's the limit! Well, I don't love you, I don't honour you, and I haven't the slightest intention of ever obeying you."

Jerry sprang up with sudden passion.

"Damn the contract!" he shouted. "I wish we'd never made it."

"So do I," said Billy; "good night"; and with that parting shot she left him.

Once in her own room her wrath speedily melted, and, in fact, at the back of her mind she began to feel slightly ashamed of herself. After all, she needn't have been so hard on Jerry. She might have been a little patient; it was absurd to lose her temper with him. With all her faults Billy had the instincts of a sportsman, and one of these is to hit a person your own size. She felt as if she had been spanking a small boy unnecessarily hard for some trivial fault.

She tried to forget the incident in a novel, but the attempt was not successful, the pages conveyed no message to her as she turned them, and she still saw her husband a forlorn little figure in the dining-room below. She cursed her wayward tongue. She really had a most unhappy knack of saying nasty things. She felt that she had been behaving like a spoilt boy who amuses himself by throwing stones, careless of how much he may hurt. She got up once or twice with the intention of going downstairs and "making it up"; but the act of singing small was always distasteful to masterful Billy, so she postponed the fulfilment of her good resolutions till the next morning.

To her credit, be it said, she went downstairs next day with the full intention of carrying them out. She came into breakfast with the firm resolve to be most amiable to Jerry. To her surprise she found that he wasn't there, and she had her breakfast alone. This had been quite a usual proceeding for some time after her marriage, but Jerry had been a consistently early riser ever since he had begun to fall in love with his wife.

Billy felt rather irritated at this unexpected check to her new-found virtue. She had expected to find Jerry waiting for her, very miserable and penitent, and she would then have told him that last night's row was all her fault, and that she was sorry she had upset him, for which gracious words on her part he would very properly have overwhelmed her with gratitude.

As a crowning act of condescension she had intended to go riding with him, and for that purpose had put on her riding habit. She had pictured the look of pleasure which would light up Jerry's face when she walked into the room thus attired. It is rather disappointing when you are expecting to make a triumphant entry to find that you have to do it to an empty house. Billy began to feel that the part of peacemaker perhaps didn't suit her after all. She was on the point of abandoning it and going out when Jerry appeared. He was looking rather yellow, as if he had not had a particularly good night. He hardly looked at Billy, and he didn't notice her riding kit at all.

"Morning, Billy," he said.

There was a tone of sulkiness in his voice which Billy had never known before. She was not accustomed to being treated in this casual manner and she resented it.

"Nice manners you've got," she said; "I've a great mind not to go riding with you."

"I'm not going riding," he replied shortly, and began his breakfast.

Billy flushed with anger, but she controlled herself with an effort. After all, why start another row? Besides, she reflected, she would take it out of him

later when he had recovered his temper. So she went to the telephone and ordered her horse.

But she was not at all in her customarily equable state as she trotted through the Park gates. Jerry's reception of her had annoyed her extremely, and she proceeded to work off her feelings in a rousing canter as soon as she reached the tan. Walking didn't suit her that morning and she scarcely gave her horse any breathers at all, much to that animal's distress, for Billy rode heavy.

"Dear! dear!" cried a voice at her elbow; "don't you ever get tired? Anyhow, your horse does; look at him, poor dear!"

Billy pulled up as soon as she heard Lady Fairborough's greeting; she was flushed with her exercise and her habit was flecked with foam.

"I'm in a bad temper," she said, "and I'm trying to get rid of it. However, you're an excellent cure."

Lady Fairborough laughed.

"As a sedative, I suppose?" she said. "Where have you been all this time? I hardly ever see you now, and when you do come here you're so wrapped up in your husband that you have no time for poor me. Why didn't you bring him this morning?"

Billy cut the air with a vicious little flick of her riding whip without answering. Lady Fairborough noticed the action.

"Ah," she said, "you've had a row."

"Yes," replied Billy, "I jumped on him rather badly last night, and he hasn't got over it yet."

She gave her own version of the previous evening's encounter.

"I don't like rows," said Lady Fairborough meditatively; "they're bad things—I know."

Billy was disgusted at this reception of her grievances.

"Well," she said, "I was in the right, and anyhow he began it."

"You seem to have finished it pretty effectively," replied her companion.

"You see he's not quite up to my weight," laughed Billy.

"All the more reason why you should ride him easy," said Lady Fairborough.

Billy went home prepared to give Jerry another chance. He was apparently at his club, however, for he did not turn up for lunch. He came home to dinner, but by that time Billy's ardour had become somewhat damped and Jerry's indifferent face on the other side of the table didn't stimulate her to further efforts. Nevertheless, she enjoyed her dinner, which was apparently more than he did. She also occasionally essayed conversation, but it becomes fatiguing to talk about subjects which seem to possess no interest for the person addressed. So Billy concentrated her attention on the dessert.

It was then that Jerry departed for the first time from a sequence of monosyllables.

"I wish you'd ask Langton to dinner, Billy," he said.

Billy looked up surprised. It seemed a strange request to come from Jerry, and his tone was not particularly cordial.

"Oh?" she said. "I thought you weren't keen on Mr. Langton."

"I think I ought to recognize his existence," he replied, with a pompous air which was not natural to him. It was clear to Billy that he was putting it on, though she couldn't imagine why.

"What are you getting at?" she asked.

"I just wanted to see if you wanted him to come. I see you don't, that's all," replied Jerry.

Billy restrained her rising temper. She remembered what Lady Fairborough had said that morning. Perhaps, after all, rows were bad things; certainly they shouldn't be of chronic occurrence, and, anyway, Jerry wasn't up to her weight—she ought to ride him easy.

So she turned a smiling face to her husband.

"My dear Othello," she said, "I will certainly ask him, if you like; but you must promise not to poison the wine or attempt the smothering act with your bedroom pillow."

Billy had hoped that her playful sally would have cleared away the clouds from Jerry's brow. He had often laughed at more feeble efforts of hers before, but a remarkable change seemed to have been effected in her little husband. He named a day and relapsed into his grumpy manner. Billy attributed this at the time to his not liking the process of climbing down. They separated to their own rooms after dinner, but Billy subsequently thought that she might as well be companionable, so she went down and joined Jerry in the library. To her surprise she found him arrayed in his discarded, many-tinted smoking-jacket, and shod in his carpet slippers. She couldn't refrain from remarking on his vivid appearance.

"I suppose that is the Standard of Independence," she said.

She spoke quite good-naturedly, but Jerry flared up at once.

"Yes," he said, "it is," and proceeded to bury himself in a book.

The next day Billy bethought her of the invitation to Langton. She went up to her boudoir to write it.

She dipped her pen in the ink, and then she paused. Why on earth did Jerry want Langton to come to dinner? He had made the request too in such a funny way. He had certainly not been actuated by motives of hospitality or liking for the proposed guest. By what then?

Billy chewed the handle of her pen.

She recalled the scene when Jerry had mentioned the subject, his petulant, jealous outburst when she had expressed surprise, his obviously assumed reason that he ought to "recognize the existence" of Langton, and his relapse into surliness after she had agreed to do what he wanted. Something had been working at the back of his queer little mind. What was it?

The pen gave her no inspiration, so she commenced making balls of blotting paper.

It was really extraordinary that Jerry should want Langton to come. The two men were so utterly opposed to each other in every way. They had nothing in common—except herself. No, they hadn't even got that. The more she thought over what Jerry had said the less she liked it. There had been something sinister in his artificiality. Could it be that he had resolved to break up her friendship with Langton by getting her to ask him to the house and then doing something or other ridiculous, something that would disgust him and humiliate her? It would be awfully mean; but

she felt that Jerry was quite capable of being that. It would also be rather clever—that made her doubt whether he had ever thought of it.

So she didn't write the invitation.

But Jerry recurred to it at lunch.

"Written to Langton?" he asked.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Oh, I forgot all about it."

"Well, you may as well do it after lunch."

Billy went on with her lunch for a few minutes in silence.

"I'm not particularly anxious to have Mr. Langton to dinner," she said.

"You seem to be particularly anxious not to."

"You needn't make a more complete fool of yourself than Nature has rendered inevitable," replied Billy angrily. She had come to the conclusion that Lady Fairborough's policy of meekness didn't suit her.

Jerry rose from the table.

"All right," he said; "I'll ask him myself."

Billy rose in her turn.

"Very well," she said; "as I don't want him to think that I'm married to a wandering lunatic I'll go and write to him now."

She went upstairs to write the letter, but she was more determined than ever that Langton shouldn't come. She had never written to him before, although she knew his address, for he had often mentioned his studio to her. The significance of this occurred to her when she got as far as "Dear." What was she to call him? "Frank" was easily spoken in everyday speech, but, somehow, writing it seemed a different thing. She

sucked her pen meditatively and began to write "Mr." She looked at it critically, and came to the conclusion that it wouldn't do—especially in view of what she was going to say, so she scratched it out. Her completed note was short and to the point, it ran—

"DEAR FRANK,

"Jerry wants me to ask you to dinner next Thursday. I don't want you to come, so please say you're engaged. I'll explain when we meet.

"Yours,

"BILLY."

She didn't quite know how she was going to explain when they met, but she trusted to being able to invent something. The important thing was that Langton shouldn't come to dinner, and she felt that he could hardly do so after receiving that letter.

On the next day she received his reply, politely declining the invitation on the plea of a prior engagement. She tossed the letter across the table to Jerry. He scrutinized the wording.

"Dear Mrs. Aynesworth," he commented, with unpleasant emphasis; "admirably discreet!"

Langton had been in doubt as to whether to write to her as "Billy" or not, but her note had been so extraordinary that he had decided on the more formal mode of address. Then he rolled her letter up into a ball, threw it at the wastepaper-basket, which he missed, and promptly forgot all about it.

It was subsequently found by Mrs. Peters.

Mrs. Peters was the housekeeper who attended upon the occupants of the various studios, of which there

were four in all. Her occupation consisted in undertaking their laundry work at exorbitant rates, and intermittently removing the dust from one part of a studio to another. It was whilst she was thus engaged that she came across Billy's note. She straightened it out and read it. It obviously interested her, for she folded it up and put it in her pocket.

Then she went on shifting dust.

CHAPTER XIII

HAD Billy and Jerry been a pair of ordinary people they could of course have made up their differences, and might have been handed down to posterity as an excellent example of a sensibly happy couple—the adverb should be noted. But they were not a pair of ordinary people. Moreover, they should not have been a pair at all.

Hence, they didn't make it up. In fact, there was a spirit of antagonism and not of compromise prevailing between them. Jerry's emotions had experienced a very rough time at Billy's hands. His little world had been turned upside down, trampled on, and flattened out, and now presented a completely different shape. He wasn't accustomed to it yet, and he brooded over his wrongs, and blamed Billy for them.

To a great extent he was right. Billy was largely responsible for the present situation. She had gone out of her way to make it clear to him that they had no interests in common, whereas had she possessed any tact she would have endeavoured to conceal that unsatisfactory state of things. Of course it was her quick temper that had made her speak to Jerry as she did, and, like quick-tempered people, her words passed out of her mind almost as quickly as they passed out of her mouth. She couldn't realize that they lingered and stung in the memory of her husband, and when in

consequence he did not instantly respond to her well-meant efforts at reconciliation, she promptly abandoned them and produced a fresh supply of vitriol.

But Billy found that if Jerry was a difficult person to make peace with, he was a still more aggravating person to quarrel with, for he wasn't up to her fighting weight at all. Consequently, altercations finally ceased and became merged in indifference—and that was, if anything, worse.

A goddess may become somewhat weary of being the object of continual worship, but she would find it infinitely more trying to be relegated to the rank of an ordinary mortal and receive none at all. Billy soon began to realize this, and the reflection that it was entirely her own fault tended to exasperate rather than to console. She had become heartily sick of Jerry's homage, it had annoyed her by its persistence, and she had endeavoured to cure him of it. He was effectually cured now. Billy began to feel quite bored—she had become accustomed to the atmosphere of incense, and she appreciated that it was rather soothing after it was withdrawn.

No woman objects to being loved, though she scorn the lover. She may laugh at him, she may think him a fool, she may even profess to regard his feelings towards herself as being part of his folly, but she doesn't really; she considers that they constitute his one redeeming feature. So it was with Billy when Jerry ceased to worship at her shrine. She felt like one of the neglected deities in the British Museum at whom mankind of to-day would poke its umbrellas, were it not compelled to leave them in the entrance hall.

And what of Langton ?

Well, the general exodus from Town for the summer holidays had begun, and Langton shut up his studio and departed abroad to sketch and loaf and generally enjoy himself. Langton was no bread-and-butter artist. That is to say, his bank balance did not depend upon his art. It would be more true to say that his art depended upon his bank balance. He painted for an occupation, not a living; he was quite well enough off to be able to do as he liked, and he found an artist's life a very pleasant background to his otherwise rather strenuous pursuits.

He had seen Billy at the golf club on the day after he had written declining her invitation.

" Please explain," he had said.

" Oh," she had replied, " I knew you would have a perfectly rotten time, so I thought I'd give you a chance of escape."

It was rather a lame explanation, but it had been quite sufficiently convincing for Langton, who wasn't deep. Now he had gone away, and Billy became more dull than ever. Soon she would be departing from London—with Jerry. The prospect was not attractive. Where would they go, and what would they do ? The contract, which had insensibly relaxed into a fairly workable arrangement, had been shattered and reconstructed. It was now all patches and joints, hard and nobby. There was no longer any elasticity in it. At first it had been all right, then it had stretched too much, now it wouldn't stretch at all.

" Marriages should be like leases," said Billy to Jim one day, " for seven, fourteen, or twenty-one years."

"Most people prefer a freehold," he replied, "and it's much more respectable."

"I don't want to be respectable; I want to be jolly."

"Be content to be jolly respectable," said Jim.

He was sitting in Billy's boudoir, and she was striding about the room. She came and sat on the arm of his chair, and rumpled his hair with her long, cool fingers.

"Dear old Perfect Person," she said; "you're the very embodiment of respectability. Sometimes I almost wish you'd startle us all by doing something outrageous."

She leant over him, and her soft hair brushed his cheek. He looked up at her so near and yet so infinitely distant, and a sudden impulse moved him to take her in his arms and kiss her and tell her—well, that would have probably been sufficiently "outrageous" to satisfy Billy. As a matter of fact, he didn't do anything of the sort. He removed Billy's disturbing fingers from his hair, and rose from his seat.

"I think I'll go home," he said, "before you have quite destroyed my parting."

Branksome had proved to be quite correct in his prophecies, and his former clients had transferred their attentions to Jim. Moreover, they didn't suffer from the change, for Jim was a hard worker, absolutely reliable, and got on well with the judges. Consequently, he succeeded in gaining the confidence of clients to a greater extent than those who were more strikingly gifted. Jim could not thrill a jury, but he could always get a jury to listen to him, and whilst

another advocate would convey the impression that he was a very clever fellow in charge of a somewhat bad case, Jim always seemed to be a very ordinary individual in charge of a good one. That was of course largely due to his personality, but it is a personality that makes for success.

But although success was pleasant—it is always that—it didn't bring with it the pleasure it might have done, for Billy was out of his reach, and it was Billy he wanted. His yearning for her had not slackened with time, nor been dulled by the realization of the impossibility of its ever being gratified. That was why he still continued to visit her ; though the pleasure he derived from her society was qualified by the bitterness of unobtainable desire. It was, in fact, the policy of the second best that he pursued ; perhaps not a wise one for him, but quite harmless so far as it concerned Billy.

For Jim was an honest man.

Jim mitigated Billy's sense of boredom to some extent, but it was reserved for her younger sister Winnie to relieve her of it altogether as July reached its close. Winnie burst into the house one day, and in a bubble of excitement announced that she was engaged. It transpired that the object of her affections was a certain Sam Robinson.

"Sam's an awful dear," said Winnie. "He's a *gentleman* farmer," she explained with emphasis.

"And where does he gentlemanly farm ?" asked Billy.

"In Alberta ; we're going to be married at once and go back."

"Alberta ?" queried Billy.

"Yes, Canada, you know."

"Oh yes—where the snow comes from."

"Don't be silly, it's lovely in Alberta; Sam says he hardly ever sees any snow the whole year round. Canada's not an inhabited iceberg."

"Well, I didn't suggest that you'd be crowded."

"I don't think you're at all nice; I thought you'd be pleased," pouted Winnie.

"Seriously," said Billy, "I didn't anticipate your ending your life darning socks and milking refractory cows."

"I like darning socks, and I've no doubt I could learn to milk a cow, if it was a nice one. And then Sam's got lots of horses," continued Winnie, with growing enthusiasm, "and you shall come over and see us and ride all day."

"Thanks," said Billy dryly; "you'll let me know which are your at-home days, and what tube I take, won't you?"

Billy unearthed an atlas from a bookcase, and found the map of Canada. She placed her finger on it vaguely—geography was not her strong point—"My dear Kid," she said, "the kind of society you will meet over there is found over here in the Zoo."

"Oh, Billy!" said Winnie, half crying, "you're simply horrid. Wait till you see Sam."

Billy saw Sam that same day. Winnie trotted him out with a splendid air of proprietorship.

"Billy," she said, "this is Sam. Sam, this is Billy."

Billy liked her prospective brother-in-law very much. He was a tall, raw-boned man of anything between thirty and forty, who had apparently got his "London clothes"—as he called them—in a tremendous hurry,

for they only fitted him occasionally. In spite of that, he looked well in them, or rather, he showed how very well he would have looked had he not been in them. It was perfectly obvious that Nature had designed him for a slouch hat, a soft shirt, baggy trousers, and a horse who required a man to ride him.

Sam had a beard, but it was a nice beard. It was of the colour of ripening corn. He looked you straight in the eyes when he spoke; he didn't speak often, but obviously knew what he wanted and expected to get it.

That was why he had got Winnie.

He had suddenly come to the conclusion that he wanted a wife. He was well enough off to afford one, and he came to London for the purpose in much the same way that a woman goes to Paris for a hat. He hadn't liked the London patterns—there were too many feathers on them. He wanted something more simple. Then he met Winnie—she was simple enough, so he took her.

He had met her at a dinner-party; ingratiated himself with her mother, got himself invited to her house, managed somehow or other to see her by hook or by crook ten times in a fortnight, and proposed to her on the tenth; was promptly accepted by Winnie, carried away by romantic enthusiasm; alarums and excursions by Holroyd *père, mère et fils*, and floods of tears from Winnie. This lasted a week, and then the family capitulated subject to a long engagement; frank announcement by Sam of his intention to marry Winnie in September; more alarums and excursions, and again capitulation by the now exhausted Holroyd family, generous settlements by Sam, accompanied by

innumerable expensive presents to whomsoever could be induced to accept them, and—*voila tout*.

All this Billy gathered in bits, and at various times, from her agitated relations. She thought that they might have consulted her on the subject, but, as a matter of fact, they had been so swept off their feet by the tempestuous wooing of Sam that they hadn't given her a thought. Now, however, her help was needed. It was imperative that Winnie should shop, and Billy was desired to give her services as a sort of Inspector-General of Wardrobes.

Winnie was daintily inclined in her choice, but Billy would have none of it.

"Let us be utilitarian," she said; "you'll probably have to wash your own clothes, and they'll look better when they're hung out to dry if they've got no holes in 'em; besides, I expect a Canadian mangle is about as destructive as a threshing machine."

Billy now found her time fully occupied with Winnie, and she practically forgot the existence of Jerry altogether. He reminded her of it when August set in hot and airless.

"I'm sick of London," he said, "and I shall go off to Sutcliffe Park; one can breathe there at all events."

"All right," said Billy, "do. It'll be another week before I shall have fixed Winnie up, then I shall want a breather myself."

"I suppose you'll go to Beachaven?" said Jerry. "Sutcliffe Park's a little too dull for you."

Billy looked at him surprised. It was the first time that Jerry had suggested a temporary separation. He must have changed indeed. The suggestion, however, accorded exactly with her own wishes.

"Yes," she said, "I think I shall. I suppose you'll come over later?"

"I dare say," he replied. "I'll let you know."

Jerry went off to Sutcliffe Park the next day. He was very glad to get away from London, and not averse to being free from Billy. His feelings towards her had changed more than either of them suspected. She had acted upon him electrically, she had first attracted and then repelled. Not that he disliked her, but she was beginning to jar upon him; her characteristics were utterly opposed to his, she was the aggressive affirmation of everything that he was not.

A somewhat remarkable change to occur in a man who but a short time ago had been head over ears in love with his wife! True, but his love had been torn into little pieces, and then thrown back in his face. It wasn't sufficiently strong to stand such violent treatment. Love is like wine, it varies according to the year of its vintage. Jerry's was not originally of particularly fine quality, and it had become a bit "corked" into the bargain. The passion which had surged in his shallow little soul had been distorted by jealousy, and inverted by contempt. Billy had, in fact, swept her little husband aside in the same careless way that she occasionally knocked a wine glass off the table.

And Jerry was brittle.

As a matter of fact, there was nothing surprising in this sudden revulsion of feeling on his part. Revulsions of feeling usually are sudden.

It was rather a pitiful state of things, and it was certainly Billy's fault. Had she borne with her husband, soothed his jealousy, made the best of him—for, after all, she had married him—things might have run

smoothly between them, and, indeed, would have done so. Now a bit of grit had got into the wheels and neither Billy nor Jerry evinced the slightest desire to pull it out. These things ought to be attended to at once.

Lord Sutcliffe and Blanche were very glad to see Jerry, but they were rather surprised to hear that Billy was not coming.

"This place bores her," explained Jerry, "and I bore her too."

"Really!" said Blanche; "and does she bore you?"

"Oh no," said Jerry; "she's too noisy for that."

"In other words, you've quarrelled," said his sister.

"Oh no. We did throw things at each other the other night, but we're preserving an armed neutrality now."

"Who got the best of it?"

"I'm beginning to think I did," said Jerry, with a malicious little chuckle.

Lord Sutcliffe was greatly disturbed in his mind at the breach in the relations between Jerry and Billy. It seemed to postpone his own dreams of the result of their union to the very remote future. He had anxious talks with Blanche on the subject, and she somewhat consoled him.

"It's best as it is, father," she said; "let them keep apart all the summer, and they'll simply fly into each other's arms for the sheer novelty of the thing when they meet again."

And on general principles Blanche's remark was probably justified.

So it came about that Jerry dawdled away the

summer at Sutcliffe Park, and Billy had a thoroughly strenuous time at Beachaven. Winnie was married at the end of September, and Jerry and Billy met on that occasion, were quite amiable to each other, and departed on their various ways again—Billy to put in her usual round of autumn visits, and Jerry for another week at Sutcliffe Park before returning to London for good.

But Jerry got very bored when he was once more shut up in his big Queen's Gate house by himself. Moreover, he no longer looked forward to the return of Billy to end his *ennui*. He had done that once, and the result had not been satisfactory. He was certainly not going to fall in love with his wife twice. His bitterness against her had, indeed, disappeared, but his indifference towards her had, if anything, increased. He would be quite glad to have her in the house—her own part of the house—quite glad to see her occasionally at meals, quite glad to listen to her conversation, quite glad, in fact, to get back to the contract as originally framed.

London is supposed to be an amusing place, and sufficiently catholic to cater for all tastes. Jerry was in need of amusement during those early days of October, but he sought for it vainly. He spent his days at his club, and his evenings at various places of entertainment; but the theatres annoyed him with their, to his mind, unreal ideas of married life, and the music halls gave him a headache. Then, one night, he did find something to his taste, for he strolled into Queen's Hall by mistake for Maskelyne and Cook's, having taken the wrong entrance.

He got a seat in the non-smoking part of the hall,

and settled himself down to listen to the music. It pleased him very much. So did the cheery voice behind him which greeted him as he rose to stretch his legs during the interval.

"How do you do, Mr. Aynesworth; I hope you haven't forgotten me. I've just returned to England, and I've taken a flat at Earl's Court. You must come and sing to me."

It was Mrs. D'Arcy.

CHAPTER XIV

BILLY came home at the end of October. But she did not find Jerry on the mat to welcome her, as she had done when she returned the previous year. Nor did she see him at dinner. She dined in solitary state, and felt rather dull. She wanted to talk to some one, and Jerry would have done as well as any one else. She had to put up with the butler, but he was an indifferent substitute.

After dinner she went into the library to await Jerry's return. She felt quite amiably disposed towards him, not having seen him for so long. She not unnaturally expected him to reciprocate for the same reason. But then she pictured him boring himself to death at the club, whereas he was enjoying himself very much at Mrs. D'Arcy's flat in Earl's Court.

Billy noticed that Jerry's musical proclivities had apparently broken out badly again, for the pianola was littered with songs, obviously recently purchased, and that worthy instrument seemed badly in need of rest when she tried it. She soon got tired of waiting for Jerry, and retired to her own part of the house, and shortly afterwards went to bed.

She didn't see Jerry the next morning either, for her horse came round before he was up, and when she returned from the Park he had just gone out. He turned up to dinner, however, and apparently seemed

quite pleased to see her, though certainly not enthusiastic.

"You are getting dissipated," she said, "staying out all night and coming in with the milk. You can't do without your beauty sleep, you know."

"Oh, I got that this morning. Besides, I wasn't so very late; I was home before twelve o'clock."

"You never thought how lonely I should feel with no one to talk to, did you?" said Billy.

"No," said Jerry, "I didn't. I imagined that after your long holiday you would return in perfect health."

"That's rather smart for you, Jerry," laughed Billy; "you evidently haven't been dull. Have you been sharpening your teeth on the grindstone in the pantry, or is it the effect of the Sandow's Exercises you seem to have been playing on the pianola?"

"Oh, I haven't had a bad time," said Jerry complacently.

They went into the library after dinner. It was Jerry's suggestion. He was apparently no longer averse to his wife's society. On the other hand, he didn't seem particularly to care whether he had it or not. He sat and smoked a cigarette whilst Billy talked. That had frequently happened in former days, but there was a subtle difference on this occasion—hitherto Jerry's cigarette had formed a sort of accompaniment to Billy's conversation, but now it was her conversation that accompanied his cigarette.

When he had finished his cigarette, Jerry went to the pianola and began sorting his music.

"Going to sing?" queried Billy.

"Yes; but not here. I'm going out."

"Out," she repeated, puzzled. "You haven't gone in for a barrel organ, have you?"

He winced somewhat at her chaff.

"No," he said. "I'm going round to Mrs. D'Arcy's, if you want to know."

"Mrs. D'Arcy? Who's she? Oh——" she added as her memory freshened, "do you mean the woman who made eyes at you at Algiers, and told you you could sing?"

Jerry stuffed the songs he had selected into his music-case angrily. Billy saw that she was annoying him, but she couldn't resist the temptation of continuing her teasing.

"Don't think I'm jealous," she said; "but I'm curious to know what your relations are with Mrs. D'Arcy. Is she going to be a sister to you, or a mother, or a pianola, or what?"

"I think," said Jerry, "that your remarks are in rather bad taste—under the circumstances."

"Oh!" said Billy, "I didn't know that they were as serious as all that—the circumstances, I mean."

Jerry flung out of the room in a temper and Billy leant back in her chair and laughed. Needless to say she attached no importance to the reappearance of Mrs. D'Arcy. She had told Jerry on a former occasion that he was quite at liberty to have women friends if he could get them, and her inclination was, if anything, to congratulate him upon his unexpected success. She felt rather dull though in the house by herself, so she sent for a taxi—Jerry had appropriated the car—and went round to see her people at Lancaster Gate. It was an unexpected honour which they duly appreciated.

"Husband run away?" inquired Sydney sympathetically.

"More or less," replied his sister; "he is at present engaged in duets with another man's wife, but as that other man is dead I don't suppose it matters."

"Billy!" gasped Mrs. Holroyd; "what on earth do you mean?"

Billy condescended to explain, and her mother was sufficiently relieved to be able to go on with her worsted.

"What a pity that you haven't got an ear for music," she murmured.

Billy passed a very pleasant evening in the bosom of her family. She learnt, however, that she would not be able to repeat the experience very often, for the Lancaster Gate lease was falling in and the Holroyds had determined not to renew it, for now that the family had so diminished in size the house was bigger than they needed. An opportunity had also presented itself enabling them to acquire the freehold of the house they annually rented at Beachaven, and the idea was being favourably considered—especially by Sydney, who wanted diggings of his own in Town and freedom to sow wild oats, of which he had a plentiful supply.

A few days later Billy called on Mabel Cartright and took her off to Sheen Park to play golf. They found the greens encumbered with leaves which had already begun to fall from the trees and putting became a sort of nightmare in consequence. No amount of sweeping could have kept the greens at Sheen Park clear in the autumn, for not only did the trees surrounding them deposit their discarded foliage thereon but the wind kept it constantly in motion. Consequently

the committee wisely kept their money in their pockets and did nothing.

"Frank would be mad if he were here," said Billy, as a regular wave of leaves suddenly swept across the green and deflected her ball, which was making straight for the hole.

"Oh, Frank won't come under these conditions," laughed Mabel; "he came down with me a couple of days ago and after the sixth hole he put his ball in his pocket and said he would rather play me draughts in the club house. It wasn't half so bad as it is now either, and of course it'll soon be worse."

"Yes," said Billy, "I suppose we must say good-bye to golf until next year. It was in the autumn and winter that God created the holes at Sheen Park, out of leaves and mud created He them," she added irreverently.

She made a mental reservation, however, to the effect that golf with Langton even under these circumstances might still be enjoyable for him and her, though neither of them had found it particularly so in the society of Mabel. It was the same evening that she detected a fresh change in Jerry.

"Don't forget that we're dining with the Fairfaxs' to-morrow," she said casually at dinner.

"Oh, what a nuisance!" said Jerry. "I was going out."

"Well, you'll have to do so with me for a change," replied Billy tartly; "surely Mrs. D'Arcy can spare you for one evening."

"I didn't say I was going to see Mrs. D'Arcy."

"Have you any other amiably disposed ladies on your list?" inquired his wife.

Although Billy regarded Jerry's infatuation for Mrs. D'Arcy as a matter of no importance, still it irritated her somewhat. It was the absurdity of it that vexed her; she felt that in a dim sort of way it cast ridicule upon herself. She professed to Jerry to regard Mrs. D'Arcy as a sort of tame hurdy-gurdy, but, although that comparison annoyed him, it didn't convince her.

It was a very unwilling little husband that accompanied her to the Fairfaxs' the next night. He was obviously bored with the proceedings throughout the evening, and Billy felt absolutely obliged to essay some reason for his apparent gloom. So she explained to Mrs. Fairfax that she thought Jerry had "caught something," which, besides being a deliciously vague statement, had the added advantage of being true. She tackled him about it on the way home in the car.

"I hope the next time you come out with me, you'll sit up and behave pretty," she said.

"You needn't worry," he answered; "I'm not coming any more."

"Really!" said Billy.

"No," he replied. "We'll go back to the old arrangement; it suited us very well."

"Oh, all right," said Billy; "but there are two or three things that I've accepted for you already."

"Well, you can easily get me out of them."

"No, I can't, and what's more I'm not going to; you'll jolly well have to come."

He did go to them, though unwillingly enough, but after that, Billy went out alone, as she had done immediately after her marriage and before Jerry had craved her constant companionship. It will be remembered

that people had got quite accustomed to seeing Billy at their houses alone and subsequently also to finding her invariably accompanied by her husband. But it was quite another matter when she again appeared without Jerry. Moreover, the old excuses wouldn't work. It was all very well originally to say that Jerry didn't go out, but Jerry had gone out, he had been as continually at the heels of his wife as a pet spaniel; now he was never to be found there at all. The world drew its own conclusions and decided that Billy was a neglected wife. Poor Billy!

At the end of a month, Billy was firmly established in the circle in which she moved as a deserving object of sympathy. No cheerfulness on her part could dispel the illusion—her friends put it down to courage; no repudiation of sympathetic suggestions could alter the views of the sympathizers—they put that down to loyalty; no obvious indignation at being regarded as a sort of invalid when, as a matter of fact, she was sound and whole could change the verdict of society—they put that down to self-respect. But Billy felt that she had really got the last straw on her fine young shoulders when normally clear-sighted Mrs. Mervyn drew her aside one night in the hall of her flat, where Billy had been dining, kissed her tenderly and said—

"Poor dear. I *am* sorry!"

Billy felt furious.

"Yes," she said, "so am I. Every one I know seems to have gone mad."

Jerry was out when she got home, but she waited for him. She was burning with things to say and she intended to say them before she went to bed. He

came in about half-past eleven humming a song and obviously cheerful.

"Hullo, Billy," he said, "you're up late. What price beauty sleep yourself?"

"I want to talk to you," she answered.

"Right oh," he replied; "fire away."

He helped himself to a whisky and soda and lit a cigarette.

"What's the trouble?"

"You are."

"Me?"

"You're getting a frightful reputation."

Jerry became interested.

"Dear me," he said, "am I? What do people say I do?"

"Well, they think you're a regular rip who deserts your wife."

"Really!" he said, "that's splendid; do they also say that I beat her?"

"They haven't quite come to that yet, but they soon will. They overwhelm me with sympathy, and nothing I say or do will convince them that I don't want it."

"Well, it's not my fault."

"It is your fault; that's just it. It's all happened because you don't go out with me as you used to."

"I used not to."

"I know, but then you changed; you can't go both ways through the turnstiles. The fact of the matter is, Jerry, that you've got to come out with me again."

"There we differ."

"There's no room for difference, it's the only thing to do; you've made me look ridiculous—oh, I don't

suppose you meant to, but there it is, and you've got to be a butterfly again, that's flat."

"Well, I'm not going to, that's equally flat."

Jerry rose from his seat as if to end the conversation. Billy rose too, and they faced each other. She was keeping her temper rather well for her. She was very much in earnest. Perhaps that was the reason.

"It's your duty, Jerry," she said; "you owe it to me as your wife."

Jerry fidgeted about with his tumbler.

"I don't owe you any duty," he replied; "duty's barred by our contract."

"There are some things that can't be barred," she said; "this is one of them. You're bound to put me right in the eyes of the world."

"I can't help it if the world wants glasses. If the world saw things as they are, you wouldn't require to be put right."

"And as the world doesn't see things as they are?"

"There's not much good in trying to make it. Anyhow, I'm not going to."

Billy didn't answer for a few moments. She picked up her opera cloak and put it over her arm.

Then she turned to her husband.

"You're behaving like a blackguard," she said.

"You're very good at calling people names," he retorted hotly, "when you don't get exactly what you want. I don't know that you're such a very perfect person yourself. You talk of my duty to you as my wife, what about yours to me as your husband?"

"I never went outside the terms of our contract, you did. It's because you did and now want to back out of it that the present state of things has happened.

I'm asking you to mend your own breakage, and I say you're a blackguard if you don't."

"Mend the breakage yourself," he replied rudely.

"How can I?"

"Easily enough. You complain of the sympathy of your friends when you go to see them. Well, don't go to see them. Do something else."

Billy swept past him into the hall.

Jerry watched her as she mounted the stairs. He heard the soft motion of her dress after she had passed from his sight, and some of the old attraction she had possessed for him seized him for the moment.

He felt rather ashamed of himself.

He poured out another whisky and soda.

CHAPTER XV

"WHAT I want," said Billy, "is something to do."

Jim wrinkled his brow in thought.

"Bridge," he suggested.

"I hate it."

"Music."

"Ditto."

"Roller-skating."

"The very thing!" she exclaimed, "you shall take me to-morrow night."

Billy had to a great extent given up going to see her friends on account of their "neglected wife" theory and her unsuccessful effort to induce Jerry to explode it. She wanted an alternative source of amusement and she had appealed to Jim for inspiration. As the result they became regular attendants at the Arcadian Skating Rink.

Jim's performance on roller skates was of the straightforward variety. He had no fancy tricks at his disposal. He had no ambition to perform acrobatic feats in the centre of the hall. He couldn't even skate backwards. Moreover, he didn't want to. In roller-skating, as in other things, Jim liked to see where he was going. He was quite content to glide industriously round the hall. He never found it monotonous. On the contrary, he found it stimulating—especially if his hands were interlaced

with those of Billy. On these occasions his plain, good-natured face fairly shone with honest enjoyment.

Billy enjoyed it too. But she would have preferred something a little more lively. She was a capable performer and she liked fancy skating. Not particularly on account of the beauty of the figures involved, but because the risk of breaking her neck always irresistibly appealed to her.

"I want to waltz," she said to Jim on one occasion, when they had been rinking about half an hour; "going round and round like this makes me feel just like an Inner Circle train."

"I can't waltz," said Jim.

"Well, you'll have to learn—I'll teach you," and she proceeded to drop poor Jim about all over the floor for the rest of the evening.

"It's really awfully nice," she said, as they went to get their skates off, "when you get into it. Of course, you want to know the floor."

"Oh, I think I know that all right," said Jim, as he painfully began to put on his coat, "but if there is any part of the floor that I don't know, perhaps you'll point it out next time we come."

Billy had to give up trying to teach Jim to dance on roller skates.

"I think you'd learn in time, if you liked," she said; "but I've never seen any one fall so awfully heavy and so frightfully often in my life."

So Jim reverted to straightforward progression and fell no more. Thenceforward, when Billy wanted to waltz, she had to make use of the services of one of the instructors, but they were all much too short to give

her any satisfaction—although, of course, they were very capable dancers.

"It's just like dancing with an awfully clever marionette," exclaimed Billy to Jim one night.

"Reach me downs don't suit you," he replied; "you want things made to measure. I should think that man would do you all right though," he added, "and, by Jove, he can skate!"

"Where is he?" asked Billy.

"There, in the centre, that tall chap; now he's coming this way."

"Good Lord!" said Billy, "it's Frank."

Langton hadn't seen her yet. He had been engaged in doing figures in the centre and now set out for a run round the hall. It was comparatively empty this evening, so that he had a clear course—moreover, there were no absurd restrictive regulations as to pace at the Arcadian so far as competent performers were concerned. And Langton was certainly competent. He got up speed with extraordinary rapidity and apparent absence of effort, and proceeded to let himself go. Tired of forward motion he reversed and continued equally fast backwards. It was as he flashed past Billy in this way that he noticed her—he swung himself round and stopped within a few feet by a powerful and expert break action of his front wheels. Billy had ceased skating and was standing at the side of the rink watching him.

"Bravo! Frank," she said, "that was smartly done. How are you? I won't ask what you are doing here, because I can see."

"I've only been here about twice. I usually go to the Olympic, but they get so shirty as soon as you

start putting on any steam that I didn't think it was good enough, so I came here instead."

"That accounts for my not having seen you before," she replied. "By-the-by, I'd better introduce you two—Jim, Mr. Langton, Frank, Mr. Stone."

Jim laughed, puzzled.

"How many of us are there," he asked; "four?"

"I don't know," said Billy, "you must sort yourselves; there's only one of me."

The band began playing a waltz. Langton turned to Billy.

"I suppose you do this sort of thing?" he said.

"Rather," she replied; "I love it. Ta, ta, Jim, for the present," she added, and sailed off on Langton's arm.

Jim leant against the rails and watched them. When they reached the centre of the room they commenced waltzing. Billy was good at it and Langton was perfect. It was a real treat to watch them dancing together—these two, so perfectly matched in form and skill. They were both tall and their skates added to their height; both possessed complete control over their movements, and that added to the gracefully careless swing of their bodies; both were thoroughly enjoying themselves, and that caused them to be completely unconscious of everything else.

At first, at least. But after a time people ceased skating themselves and took to watching the handsome couple in the centre. Billy noticed it, as she found the room becoming less crowded. But she didn't mind a bit, it didn't make her self-conscious nor spoil her enjoyment. She had a wonderful partner and she intended to make the most of him. She felt that she

had never realized before the true delight of waltzing on roller skates. She recalled the last time when her dancing had been the centre of observation. On that occasion she hadn't liked it. She had been dancing with Jerry. What a contrast!

"Thanks awfully," she said to Langton when the music ceased. "I've never had such a fine partner before."

"Nor have I," he answered; "we seem to fit."

They returned to Jim. But three is an awkward number at a skating-rink—anyhow so far as skating is concerned. Jim very soon perceived this.

"Go off, you two," he said, "and do fireworks. I can foozle along all right by myself. When you want an ambulance send for me."

So for the rest of the evening Billy and Langton proceeded to gyrate about the room with bewildering agility and had a really nice time, whilst Jim plodded along his accustomed track and had a thoroughly dull one. He saw Billy home at the end of the evening. Langton didn't accompany them. Jim was rather glad of that.

"New chum?" he said interrogatively to Billy.

"More or less," replied Billy. "I play golf with him a lot. He's an awful good sort. Jerry doesn't like him," she added.

"No," said Jim dryly, "I shouldn't think he would. They haven't got much in common."

"That's just it," she assented; "even I am not a mutual attraction."

"Jerry's a bit short-sighted, you know," said Jim. "The other fellow's eyes seem to be all right," he added.

"Oh, Frank don't want glasses yet," laughed Billy. "Good night; if you've nothing better to do we might go skating again to-morrow."

"All right," said Jim; "I'll come round and fetch you after dinner."

He did so, and the next night, and the night after that. Hitherto Billy had been content with rinking two or three times a week, but now she became positively insatiable for the attractions of the Arcadian Skating Rink—Langton apparently held somewhat similar views, for he was invariably there also. Jim began to get a bit tired of it. He liked moderation in all things. Even so far as skating with Billy was concerned? Well, he got a very moderate amount of that! She usually left him after they had gone round the hall together half a dozen times and returned to him when the band was thinking of playing "God save the King."

Jim was an easy-going fellow, but he had his limits. He wasn't jealous of Langton, but he did grudge him the inordinate share which he took of Billy's society. On the other hand, it was only reasonable that Jim should be left out in the cold, for between those who can skate and those who can skate well there is a great gulf fixed. Billy and Langton, who could practically do anything they liked on wheels, were in a different world altogether to Jim, who could only make his go round in a straightforward direction.

After a couple of weeks of this kind of thing, Jim began to slacken in his attendance on Billy at the rink. After all, as he explained, he had other things to do besides skate, and so he cut down his visits first of all to about four times a week and finally to about two.

But Billy continued hers with unabated fervour and Jim at last became quite uneasy about her. Not that he thought that she was doing anything wrong in continually seeking the society of Langton. He knew that she was quite without vice, and he credited Langton with similarly harmless intentions. But he did think that Billy was very foolish, that she would find her conduct commented on and misconstrued, and that it was due to herself and her husband not to let that occur.

He resolved to speak to her about it. What right had he to speak to her? Well, he had acquired a sort of prescriptive title to criticise her behaviour. And he was fond of her, he loved her, he wasn't going to let her make a mess of things if he could prevent it. And if he couldn't prevent it? Then, at least, he would have the satisfaction of knowing that he had tried to.

He tackled her boldly on the subject one evening when he had seen her home. He came into the house with her and had a whisky and soda. Jerry was out.

"My dear Billy," he said, "you're forcing the pace a bit, aren't you?"

"Meaning?" she queried.

"This rinking—six days a week, and always the same man."

Billy laughed.

"I always suspected that Mrs. Grundy was a relation of yours," she said; "but if you object to my being so much in Frank's company, why don't you come yourself?"

"Because I think that you have a sufficient number of lookers-on already."

Billy seated herself in an armchair.

"I think you're rather a beast, Jim," she said; "a sort of dog-in-the-manger person. You won't come yourself and you won't let me go. What am I to do? Come to your rooms and help you get up your briefs? That would be nice and respectable, wouldn't it?"

"You might stay at home and look after your husband."

"Thanks awfully! Mrs. D'Arcy's quite capable of doing that."

"You could cut out Mrs. D'Arcy—or any other woman—if you wanted to."

"But I don't want to," said Billy.

Jim turned on her almost fiercely.

"Then you ought to want to," he said. "Oh, Billy, don't think that I'd deprive you of a minute's pleasure; why, dear——" He stopped confused, smothered his feelings with an effort and continued; "I think you're playing it low down on Jerry."

"Oh, do you?" replied Billy, "and what about him? Isn't he playing it low down on me?"

"If he is, it's your own fault; you've never tried to prevent him. You can have Jerry at your feet in no time if you like to try."

"I don't want him at my feet—I've had some of that already. No, Jim, my marriage cannot be regarded as a success from the sentimental point of view—that is to say, yours, not mine."

"Then make it one. You can, if you like to try. Give up this fellow Langton. Oh, I've no doubt that he's a good enough chap, but you didn't marry him; you married Jerry, and you've got to make the best of him. There's a good deal of virtue in making the best

of a bad husband, but you seem determined to make the worst of what might be a good one."

"You're an awfully good chap, Jim," said Billy, "and you're certainly an excellent advocate, but you're a rotten bad doctor, because you don't understand the case at all."

She spoke with a lightness which she did not altogether feel, for Jim had been very much in earnest and Billy had a great respect for his opinion, though she would never have admitted it, even to herself. Jim had put before her in a blunt, plain way the point of view of the honest man who considers that marriage is a sacred thing with obligations independent of contract, and who, fortunately, still represents the bulk of public opinion in this country. Jim's remarks didn't alter Billy's firmly rooted conviction that she was perfectly right, but it did enable her to realize, though dimly, that a considerable number of other people might be equally convinced that she was wrong. Her face clouded momentarily at the reflection. Jim saw it and thought that his plain speaking had offended her.

"Well, Billy," he said, "strictly speaking, I have no right—— "

"You have every right, Jim," she interrupted, impulsively, "and I love you for exercising it. I don't know what I should do without your slating me occasionally. You make me feel like a rumpled silk hat that's been nicely ironed."

Jim went home with the feeling that he had done his duty, but it didn't give him as much satisfaction as he had anticipated. He was awfully worried about Billy. She seemed to have a blind disregard for what

people might think. It was quite clear that she did not intend to discontinue her companionship with Langton in the least. As has been said, Jim acquitted him of all dishonourable intentions; but, after all, Langton was flesh and blood, and here was Billy, with an obvious preference for his society, flinging herself into his arms every night. Of course she didn't mean anything by it, but how was Langton to know that? Jim pictured himself in Langton's position—and grew very uneasy indeed. But how to stop it? He had spoken to the principal party involved. There remained Langton. He might speak to him. Jim didn't like the job. He postponed it for a time.

But Jim's conscience wouldn't let him alone. He increased his visits to the rink again, and he always saw Billy and Langton, apparently blissfully unconscious of the existence of any one else but themselves. He felt that he must interfere again, that it was his duty—perhaps also his inclination. It is bitter to see the woman you love being indiscreet in the society of somebody else.

It was some time before he actually did anything. Then, one evening, he got Langton to accompany Billy and himself to Queen's Gate. When the door had closed behind her, he turned to Langton.

"I want to talk to you," he said, "so, if you don't mind, I'll walk in your direction."

"Do," said the other.

They walked for some minutes in silence. Jim found it very difficult to begin. Even a tactful person might have found that—and Jim wasn't tactful. He finally introduced the subject in much the same way

that a clumsy servant might hand the soup—by breaking the plate.

"I don't like your skating so much with Mrs. Aynesworth," he said.

"No?" replied Langton calmly. "I do—and apparently she does."

"You probably think that I'm being impertinent."

"Not in the least. I understand from—er—Billy, that it's your privilege."

"The fact of the matter is," continued Jim, "that she don't realize that she's compromising herself."

"Thanks," said Langton. "I don't think you realize that our performances are confined to the centre of the hall."

"Of course I don't mean that there's any harm in it; but, you know, people talk."

"Yes," said Langton, with an artistically assumed yawn, "some people do."

"I thought perhaps you wouldn't mind my speaking to you," continued Jim rather lamely.

"I don't in the least, I assure you," replied Langton.

The two men came to a halt at the corner of the road.

"I was thinking of taking a 'bus from here," said Langton.

"Don't go just yet," said Jim. "I should feel much more happy in my mind about Mrs. Aynesworth——"

"I know her as Billy," interrupted Langton, warmly, "and so do you."

"Well, I should feel much happier in my mind about her if I knew that you would do something."

"Such as?"

"Need you skate with her so often? Can't you occasionally be otherwise engaged?"

"Oh, I see," said Langton, "it's a case of 'halves partner,' is it?"

"No, it isn't anything of the sort," replied Jim angrily. "I'm not sharing Billy with any one. I'm —I'm a sort of brother."

"So am I," said Langton; "a girl isn't limited to one—and here's my 'bus. Glad we've had this pleasant little chat; good night."

He swung himself on to the motor 'bus as it lumbered past. Jim watched him as he mounted the swaying staircase and half wished that he might fall off and break his neck.

But Jim wasn't feeling amiable that evening.

So he desisted from his well-intentioned but misdirected efforts to guide Billy into the path he thought she should tread, and she continued to choose any path that pleased her fancy. It usually pleased Langton's fancy also. But she wasn't always in his company. She still occasionally graced the tables of her friends at dinner or went with them to the theatre. Billy was fond of the theatre, and she was not oppressed on these occasions by the misplaced sympathies of her friends, as they were sufficiently occupied in sympathizing with the sinning-in-spite-of-herself heroine or the self-abnegating-actor-managing hero. One night she had joined a theatre-party, and after the play was over they adjourned to the Carlton for supper. Billy had enjoyed the show extremely and was thoroughly cheerful and hungry as she took her seat at the table. Then something in the expression of her *vis-à-vis* drew her

attention. He was staring over her shoulder with a curiously startled look.

"What is it?" she asked, "partial paralysis, or am I coming undone?"

"Nothing," he replied, but he seemed embarrassed.

So did the other members of the party.

"Bless my life!" said Billy, "what's come over you all? You're like a lot of waxworks."

Nobody answered her, but some one began a discussion of the play they had seen, and they all joined in it with an interest which was too pronounced to be genuine.

Billy was puzzled.

She looked backwards over her shoulder and saw Jerry and Mrs. D'Arcy having supper at the table behind her. She leisurely turned round again. The others were watching her.

"Will somebody pass me the mustard?" she said.

CHAPTER XVI

BILLY walked out on to the veranda of the Sheen Park Golf Club for about the seventh time, and gloomily regarded the weather.

"It'll go on like this all day," she said.

"Yes," said Langton, who had followed her, "it ain't good enough."

The outlook was certainly depressing. The rain was coming down in the steady, persistent way that seemed to denote a determination to continue for ever and a capacity to do so. The sulky sky overhead was leaden with water still to fall, and the links were in a general state of sop from that which had already fallen.

"We were awful fools to come," grumbled Langton; "I knew it would be like this."

"Then why did you come?" asked Billy sharply.

"Because you said it would clear up," he answered. "Now make it clear up."

"It never clears up in February," said Billy despondently. "I forgot it was February."

Langton began to whistle, "There's a sun still shining in the sky," with mournful inaccuracy. He desisted, however, it seemed hardly a suitable tune.

"What shall we do?" he asked with a yawn.

"I'll put you for ha'pennies," said Billy.

She got her putter out of her bag and putted a ball

along the boards of the veranda. It came to rest in a rapidly forming pool of water.

"That's the hole," she said, "and I reckon I'm a ha'penny up."

"I reckon you aren't," he replied, and placed his own ball neatly beside hers.

They occupied themselves in this way for about a quarter of an hour, by which time the pool had become a miniature lake, and presented too large a target to be interesting. Moreover, the veranda began to leak badly, and neither Billy nor her companion relished getting intermittent streams of water down the back of their necks. They picked up their balls and strolled into the club-room. It was quite deserted, except for the club cat, which was monopolizing the fire in the ostentatiously comfortable manner peculiar to cats. Billy lolled about the room and Langton fidgeted with stale golfing periodicals. He pulled out a pencil and made a sketch of Billy on the back of one of them. It was rather good, and he showed it to her with some pride. She approved it critically.

"I didn't know you could draw," she remarked.

"I told you I was an artist," he replied in an injured tone.

"Yes," said Billy, "but I didn't know you were a good one. Now draw another one."

Langton commenced a second sketch and then stopped.

"I have an idea," he said; "come to the studio, and I'll paint your portrait."

"Splendid!" cried Billy; "and send it to the Academy and make your fortune. What will you call it—portrait of a beautiful young woman?"

"I'll do you at the top of your swing and call it 'Fore!'"

"All right," said Billy, "I'm on. When will you begin—this afternoon?"

"Yes, we'll go right back now and start the sittings—only you won't be allowed to sit—and I'll stand you tea."

And that was how the picture of Billy—which was fated never to be finished—was begun.

Langton's studio differed sufficiently from the normal to deserve a word of description. Even Billy, who was completely ignorant of art and artists, was struck with its appearance when she entered it for the first time.

"This makes a very good 'gymn,' Frank," she said; "but where do you paint?"

It was really more like a "gymn" than a studio. A pair of iron rings hung from one of the rafters, whilst from another a stout rubber cord, to which a punching-ball was connected, descended to a staple in the floor. A couple of comfortable-looking armchairs and a sort of sofa-lounge implied that the apartment was not exclusively confined to athletic exercises, whilst an assortment of golf clubs, cricket bats, tennis rackets, an odd fencing foil, and a still more odd boxing glove—for the stuffing was coming out—gave it a decidedly sporting appearance, and completely overwhelmed by their aggressive prominence the somewhat dilapidated lay figure which lay prone in one corner of the room, together with some chipped plaster casts, a broken palette and some spoiled canvasses. An easel half-protruded modestly from behind a curtain, which also concealed other appliances of the painter's art. The

impression conveyed was that these things were there in case they were wanted, in much the same way that fire buckets ornament the walls of our public buildings.

In spite of its quaint appearance, however, the room had a decidedly comfortable aspect. Langton thoroughly understood the art of doing himself well, his carpet was of the thickest, and his cushions of the softest, lofty windows reached from floor to ceiling and admitted the greatest possible amount of sunlight when there was any, rich curtains secured him from the intrusion of draughts, electric standard lamps abounded in convenient profusion, and a telephone, which he had just installed, put theatres, taxi-cabs, district messengers, and most of his friends' houses at his disposal. But in spite of its heterogeneous contents, the room, or the studio, or whatever one liked to call it, was not crowded. It was too large for that. One might indeed have comfortably put a small London flat inside it and still have had something left over.

The only other room which Langton possessed was his bedroom. It was a very decent-sized room, but diminutive by comparison with the studio, with which it was connected by a pair of folding doors.

Although there was no sign of artistic activity, there was no lack of pictures on the walls. Billy, not unnaturally perhaps, at once concluded that Langton had painted them. He explained, somewhat to her disappointment, that they were purchases. She insisted on seeing some of his own work.

"I want to be sure that you're a proper artist before you begin on me," she remarked.

He produced a pile of canvasses from a recess she hadn't noticed.

"This is some of my stuff," he said rather apologetically. "I don't know whether you'll think I'm a proper artist or not, but they aren't quite finished."

She regarded the subjects he indicated.

"They *do* look a bit unfinished," she said; "they want clothes."

"Oh, I didn't mean that, I meant that they were in the rough."

"Well, show me one that isn't."

"I've got two or three hanging up in my bedroom that are nearly done."

He showed them to her. They were framed, but not under glass.

"When are you going to finish them?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't know," he replied carelessly; "here's the tea."

Mrs. Peters, who had been disturbed at her own tea to attend to that of the new-comers, had entered the studio whilst they were talking, and was engaged in laying the table with a violence that denoted irritation. She looked up curiously as Billy came into the room through the folding doors, and then departed to her own part of the building in the basement to resume her interrupted meal. Billy picked up a portfolio of sketches whilst Langton officiated at the teapot. He noticed her occupation.

"Oh, don't bother about those things," he said; "they're not finished either."

Billy laid down the portfolio and took the cup he offered her.

"My dear Frank," she said, "you don't seem to finish anything."

Very little progress was made so far as Billy's

portrait was concerned upon her first visit to the studio. It is true that she borrowed a golf club from Langton and posed to him for about five minutes whilst he proceeded to make what he called a "preliminary sketch"; but at the end of that time he paused to show her his method of practising "approach" shots over a chair, and incidentally thereby apprised her of the means by which the plaster casts had arrived at their damaged condition.

When Mrs. Peters arrived to clear away the tea-things, which she did suddenly and professedly under the impression that she "'eard a ring," they were both engaged in grovelling for golf balls under the sofa.

"I didn't ring," growled Langton, emerging grimy and hot.

"No?" said Mrs. Peters, in the manner which Billy, when she came to know her, described as her "defensively interrogative mood."

Billy's first visit to the studio proved so enjoyable that it formed the prelude to many others. The theatre-party incident had completely cured her of any lingering desire she might have had for the society of her friends, and, in the absence of golf, the studio provided an excellent means of passing the time. In conjunction with rinking. In fact, the two formed a very desirable combination, and whilst the evenings still found her a constant attendant at the Arcadian, her afternoons were almost as often passed at the Camden Studios, as the studios where Langton lived were called.

In this way the winter passed to its close pleasantly enough. Billy's picture had arrived at the stage of appearing indefinitely in colour upon canvas, where

it was apparently doomed indefinitely to remain. Billy was in no hurry to have it finished, for she liked going to the studio ; and, after all, what does one go to a studio for if not to have one's portrait painted ? Langton was in no hurry either.

Mrs. Peters noticed the delay. Mrs. Peters was a bit of an art critic in her way.

" It don't get on very fast, do it ? " she remarked to Langton one morning when she brought in his breakfast.

" No," replied Langton ; " the lady is rather a difficult subject."

" Yes," said Mrs. Peters thoughtfully, " I should think she was," and retired to consider for the hundredth time who exactly Billy was, and why she didn't want Langton to dine with her ; for Mrs. Peters was not long in identifying Langton's visitor with the writer of the letter she had picked up.

Mrs. Peters had for some time taken a decided interest in the doings of Langton and " his young woman," as she designated Billy when speaking of her—though not to Langton, be it said. Her interest took the inconvenient form of appearing at unexpected moments, being found in close proximity to the door when it was opened suddenly, and such-like outward and visible signs of an inward and insatiable curiosity. At first Billy and Langton had found this rather amusing, but after a time it became too continuous to be funny. They took to sending Mrs. Peters out on various errands, a task which gave Langton a malicious pleasure because he knew that she hated it. It finally developed into a kind of game between Billy and Langton in which each of them sought a pretext

productive of the greatest amount of delay. Billy easily won at this pastime. Her fertile brain experienced no difficulty in inventing a non-existent shop in some distant street as the only possible place for the purchase of some wholly unnecessary article. Langton was more prosaic in his conceptions. He rarely rose above the level of dispatching Mrs. Peters for a particular brand of pencil. Mrs. Peters suffered in silence for some time, but her turn came at last. One day Langton sent her out for the precious pencil, and, as they heard the door slam angrily behind her, he flung himself on to the sofa beside Billy and laughed till he choked. Billy sympathetically thumped his back to prevent premature asphyxiation, and whilst she was in the midst of doing so Mrs. Peters appeared in the doorway.

"You can't have got that pencil yet!" said Langton, quite taken aback by her sudden appearance.

"Oh yes, I have," she replied; "I got two last time—in case," she added significantly, "you might want another."

She placed the pencil on a table and departed with great dignity.

"Nasty old beast!" said Billy. "What did she mean by that?"

In the mean time Jerry's relations with Mrs. D'Arcy had in no way abated. That suited very well, so far as he and Billy were concerned, for it left them free to do exactly as they liked, and Billy no longer wanted him as an escort—she had other occupations. This state of things might have continued indefinitely, but for an occurrence which altered the *status in quo* considerably. It happened one night at the Arcadian

Skating Rink. Mrs. D'Arcy was there with some friends—she wasn't always with Jerry—and Billy and Langton were also there. Whether it was cheek or whether it was due to an utter inappreciation of Billy's feelings towards her can only be a matter for speculation; but the fact remains that Mrs. D'Arcy left her party and came towards Billy with a smiling face and outstretched hand, and Billy imperturbably and unmistakably cut her dead. There was no blinking the fact, it was most deliberately done, and Billy experienced the greatest pleasure in doing it.

"It was one straight from the shoulder," she said to Langton the next day, when discussing her action, and she illustrated her meaning by a lunge at his punching-ball, which promptly rebounded and hit her in the face.

"Take care she don't get her own back," remarked Langton to Billy, who was ruefully rubbing her cheek—a punching-ball hurts.

And Mrs. D'Arcy did get her own back.

Up to the time of the skating-rink incident Mrs. D'Arcy's relations with Jerry had been of quite a subdued nature, and her sentiments in regard to Billy by no means unamiable. It is true that she was amusing herself with Billy's husband irrespective of what Billy might think about it, but then it appeared equally true that Billy did not think about it at all. Mrs. D'Arcy, of course, did not know what Billy had suffered at the hands of her friends. Had she done so, she might have been less surprised at Billy's behaviour; in fact she would have given her no occasion for it.

As it was, Billy's cut direct caused Mrs. D'Arcy to declare war—inwardly, that is to say, outwardly she

was as composed as ever. The best method of attack which presented itself to her was Billy's husband, so she abandoned her attitude of platonic indolence towards him and began to take him seriously. Mrs. D'Arcy undoubtedly had the power of fascinating certain men—and Jerry was one of them. Consequently she very soon reduced him to a state of abject admiration. Then she took him to the Arcadian Skating Rink. It is perhaps needless to say that Jerry could not skate, but Mrs. D'Arcy professed such an eagerness to initiate him into the elusive art of rollers that he readily consented to go. It is also needless to remark that Mrs. D'Arcy was quite indifferent as to whether Jerry learnt to skate or not, so long as she could succeed in making Billy feel uncomfortable.

It was Billy, however, who scored. She was certainly annoyed at seeing Mrs. D'Arcy and Jerry at the rink, and was not long in surmising with approximate accuracy why they were there. It soon became quite plain that Mrs. D'Arcy was going to force herself upon her notice in the company of her husband under the impression that she would then be compelled to recognize her. With this object in view she time and again directed Jerry's faltering feet in the direction of Billy and Langton. Jerry hadn't noticed his wife yet—he was much too busy with his feet—and Mrs. D'Arcy didn't enlighten him, as she intended her presence to be a pleasant surprise for him. She finally managed to confront husband and wife, and it was such a surprise for Jerry that he forgot all about his feet and promptly subsided on to the floor. Mrs. D'Arcy smiled at Billy with a look

of triumph in her eyes, but Billy didn't turn a hair.

"I think you've dropped something," she said, and pursued her way with Langton in mazy circles.

The first round had ended in Billy's favour, but she was up against a tough opponent. Mrs. D'Arcy's next move was a distinctly subtle one. She very soon learnt that Jerry was jealous of Langton although he masked it under a show of indifference, but she was wise enough to see that matrimonial altercations on that subject would only result in the humiliation of Jerry and not of Billy, and would not assist the object she had in view. So she took a different line altogether. She adopted Billy's conduct towards herself as a grievance and saddled Jerry with the responsibility for it, reproached him for his wife's insults—and took care that her reproaches stung.

"If you chose to put your foot down you could stop it," she said; "and you ought to put your foot down."

So Jerry proceeded to put his foot down.

"You've no right to insult my friends," he said to Billy, with truculent audacity.

"You've no right to insult me by having such friends," she replied.

It was a good opening for a row and a royal, right-down row they had. Billy, of course, used her characteristic squashing tactics, but to her surprise she found that Jerry was not squashed. As a matter of fact, it was not surprising at all. Jerry unsupported was eminently squashable, but he now had Mrs. D'Arcy to back him up. That gave him a kind of immoral

courage. Moreover, he was deadly jealous of Langton. He raged inwardly with the puny fury of the weak man who has striven in vain to get that which his stronger rival has obtained without effort and, indeed, without asking. It may have appeared that Jerry had been cured of his love for Billy. But is a man capable of being cured of that complaint? Passion, once aroused, will operate for good or ill independently of the volition of the person affected. It is true that Jerry had ceased to take a pleasure in Billy's society, and that he undoubtedly did do so in that of Mrs. D'Arcy. But if he had never loved Billy, he would not have required Mrs. D'Arcy as a substitute. Jerry's love had been turned aside from its course, it was now engaged in poisoning itself—with the assistance of Mrs. D'Arcy.

Billy's position at home began to be very uncomfortable. She didn't mind rows so long as she got the best of them, but she found that she was beginning not to get the best of them. Moreover, Jerry did not confine his quarrelling to occasions when they were alone together, but began to indulge in it before the servants. He soon perceived that this gave him an enormous advantage over Billy, for the presence of the servants restrained the acidity of her tongue, whilst it seemed, if anything, to impart some to his. Billy began to find herself pitied or despised by her own domestics—according to their several tendencies—and she felt that the state of things was rapidly becoming intolerable.

May arrived resplendent with flowers and sunshine. The hotels filled up with their annual influx from America, and London braced itself for a strenuous and

successful season. It was up to Billy to show what she could do as a London hostess, but she wasn't up to it. She had got out of the way of entertaining or being entertained. Still, she felt that it had to be done, and, anyway, it would be a welcome change to the "D'Arcy Dispute," as she termed her perpetual wrangles with her husband, with alliterative irritation. It would at least give her servants something else to talk about.

Then Mrs. D'Arcy played her trump card.

Billy had been calling on Mrs. Mervyn one afternoon—as a sort of preliminary canter to her social duties. She let herself in with her latch-key upon her return home, and was surprised to hear some one playing on the piano in the drawing-room. Unsuspectingly she went upstairs and entered the room and saw Jerry sprawling on the sofa and Mrs. D'Arcy playing the piano to him.

"I want to speak to you in the library, Jerry," was all she said, and immediately closed the door; but she was pale to the lips.

"Put your foot down," said Mrs. D'Arcy encouragingly to Jerry as he left the room.

He joined Billy in the library. She was standing very still and pale by the window.

"How dare you let that woman enter my drawing-room?"

She spoke quite quietly and apparently without passion, but her eyes looked unnaturally big and she breathed quickly.

"Our drawing-room," he corrected.

Billy crossed the room and rang the bell. Jerry watched her uneasily. He had seen Billy in various

moods, but this was not one of them. Presently a servant answered the bell.

"Please remember in future," said Billy, "if Mrs. D'Arcy calls that I am not at home."

"And please remember," said Jerry with sudden assertiveness, "that I am."

CHAPTER XVII

It was Lady Fairborough who finally came to the rescue of Billy in her domestic troubles. Lady Fairborough had for some time cast a sympathetic eye over the progress of events at Queen's Gate. Her sympathy had always been less irksome to Billy than that of the rest of her friends, but now she was beginning to be very much in need of sympathy indeed, or rather, of assistance. One may consider that the affairs of a married couple have arrived at a critical stage when the husband announces to the servants that he is at home to a lady whom his wife has declined to receive. And yet it was strictly within the letter of the contract that Billy and Jerry had entered into. Billy began to find herself in an impossible position. She wanted to receive her friends, but she wouldn't receive Mrs. D'Arcy. If her drawing-room was not to be secure from the invasion of the latter, she could hardly throw it open to the former. Of course the servants would obey her instructions as to telling Mrs. D'Arcy that their mistress was "not at home"; but then Mrs. D'Arcy was not such a fool as to ask if she was. It was Jerry she called upon, and Jerry was so much under her influence that there was no knowing what he might be prevailed upon to do. It was, perhaps, highly improbable that he would take her up to the drawing-room, but Billy felt that once Mrs. D'Arcy was in the

house there was no telling to what lengths she might not go. She seemed to have no self-respect; at any rate, she did not let it interfere with her private vengeance. Poor Billy felt that Mrs. D'Arcy was "getting her own back" with interest.

So that when Lady Fairborough told her that she and her husband were going to run over to Dieppe for Whitsuntide and asked her to come too, she jumped at it.

"It'll be an interlude," said Lady Fairborough, "and you can think out all sorts of things whilst you're away. Besides, you can gamble and golf, and though neither Freddy nor I golf he knows people who do, so you'll be all right."

"You're an awful dear," said Billy. "I'll come."

"Don't put my picture amongst the unfinished ones," she said to Langton before she left, "because I shall be back in a week or two."

"Right O," he replied; "don't be longer, because we ought to get on with it a bit."

He looked at the canvas complacently.

"It's not so bad," he said.

"Not so bad as it might be, you mean, I suppose," she laughed; "if I'm like that, it's quite time I went away for a change of air."

"Oh, you will be all right as soon as I put a bit of colour into you. After all, there's plenty of time."

"Next year's Academy, I suppose?" she queried.

"Or the year after; it don't much matter, does it?" he answered.

She fidgeted about the room restlessly, and then he turned to her suddenly.

"I wish you weren't going away," he said. "I think you're an awful pig."

His words were prosaic enough, but there was genuine regret in his voice.

"Will you be dull, Frank?" asked Billy.

He came towards her quickly, and Mrs. Peters entered the room. He turned on her angrily.

"No," he said, "I did *not* ring. Go to——"

"It ain't no good," she replied complacently, "it's early closing day."

Billy got up to go.

"To be continued in our next," she said. "I wish you were coming with me. Good-bye."

"I'll stroll with you down the road," he replied, and put on a hat and followed her.

Mrs. Peters watched them as they walked out of the little courtyard on which the studios faced.

"To be continued in our next," she murmured; "so I should think!"

The next day Billy departed for Dieppe. The weather was splendid, and the little town looked bright and cheerful in the afternoon sunlight as the *Brighton* slipped in between the welcoming arms of the twin piers on her way to the quay, whilst the casino in the distance at the end of the *Plage* seemed to give an extra flutter to the tricolours which waved from its domed roof as if to denote its satisfaction at the advent of fresh English visitors with money to spend. The scene at the quay side was an animated one. The arrival of the English packet was always an event of interest, and, as Whitsuntide was late this year, and the weather was apparently under the impression that it was the middle of summer, Dieppe was full of people, most of whom desired nothing better to do than to lounge about in the sun and wear their thinnest clothes.

"This just suits me to rights," said Billy, as half an hour later she sipped a thoroughly English cup of tea at the Hôtel des Bains, and gazed at the sea which lapped lazily against the beach at the other side of the Marine Promenade. She went out after tea and strode along the *Plage* and revelled in the bustle and sunshine; then she turned into the town and explored until, having forsaken the main thoroughfares, she became hopelessly lost in a veritable tangle of narrow streets with overhanging houses whose occupants were quite unable to understand a word she said when she inquired her way. Finally, she discovered a diminutive *gendarme*, into whose ear she reiterated the words "Hôtel des Bains" with such persistence that he at last grasped the fact that she wanted to be conducted thither. So Billy returned to dinner under Government escort, and was incidentally the cause of many admiring glances being cast in her direction and also of considerable speculation as to why she was going to be locked up.

"In future," she said to Lady Fairborough at dinner, "I shall go about with a luggage label round my neck, with directions on it that I am to be forwarded here in time for meals, C. O. D., or whatever the French equivalent for it is"; and then she proceeded to attack the *menu* as if she were a second Wellington engaged upon a gastronomic Waterloo.

The next day broke fair and warm. The weather was evidently laying itself out to please.

"The French do these things so much better than we do," said Billy, as she sauntered down the quay side, apparently quite convinced that there must be an impenetrable fog at Newhaven. She had strolled

down to see the boat in. It is characteristic of English people to see boats in, in France—English boats. So Billy gazed over the side of the quay and watched the passengers of the packet disembark. Suddenly she gave a shout and nearly pushed a diminutive cockney tourist into the harbour.

"Jim!" she cried.

The sturdy-looking Englishman in grey tweeds, who was regarding a gesticulating French official with gloomy suspicion, permitted him to have the ticket he was clamouring for and turned a surprised face in Billy's direction. She pushed her way towards him.

"Where are you staying?" she shouted. She couldn't get very near him; moreover, Billy always shouted, she said it was good for her.

"Hôtel des Bains," he replied, in the confused way that all Englishmen have when they are called upon to reveal their names or addresses or, in fact, any other information above a whisper in a public place.

"Goody!" said Billy; "so am I. See you later."

She dawdled back to the hotel and found that Jim had already arrived. She demanded an explanation of his unexpected appearance.

"Did Jerry send you over to say that he couldn't live without me?" she asked.

"Not exactly," he laughed; "you see the Courts are up for the next few days, so I thought I'd run over and get a bit of a holiday. I hear that there are some golf-links here, have you tried them?"

"No," she replied; "but you and I will go and break records and things there to-morrow."

Which is exactly what she did do, for she did the fifteenth hole in one. The fifteenth is a short hole, and

Billy's feat—or rather, fluke—was a record for the time being.

She turned to Jim.

"In England," she said, "that means a bottle of whisky for the caddy, but Heaven knows what one does in France. I'm not going to set a bad example by corrupting this bright little cherub."

She gazed thoughtfully at the "bright little cherub" who carried her clubs; he seemed about eight years old, and had apparently dropped out of a picture. He smiled into her face with seraphic innocence.

"Damn fine shot!" he said.

Jim laughed.

"I think," he said, "you might compromise for five francs."

The days passed rapidly and pleasantly. Jim's society was an unexpected treat for Billy and a very welcome one, for she had not seen much of him lately. She knew that he disapproved of her conduct in regard to Langton, and, although her friendship with the latter had not in any way caused a breach in her intimacy with Jim, it had certainly conduced in conjunction with his increasing practice to his seeing less of her. By tacit consent neither of them referred to Langton or Jerry, but they gave themselves up to the complete enjoyment of each other's companionship. Needless to say, under these circumstances the time slipped by on wings, and the week which Jim had allotted to himself for his stay at Dieppe approached its end almost before he or Billy realized that it had begun. They were in the Casino Gardens one afternoon when Jim stated the cold, crude fact.

"The day after to-morrow," he said, "we go home."

"How rotten!" said Billy; "so we do. I'd forgotten all about it—at least, almost."

They had all arranged to go back together; Jim to his work; Lady Fairborough for the London season—that was her work, and rather critical work too, for this year would be the test of whether she was reinstated or not; Billy to—what was Billy going back to? She wondered.

"I don't want to go—home," she said. The pause was significant. Jim was about to make a remark, but she stopped him.

"No," she said, "don't be philosophical, old thing. I'm beginning to understand that you ought to learn how to make a bed before you try lying on it."

She threw off her serious air and began to frivol.

"I wonder what sort of bed you would make, Jim," she said. "I'm sure you'd get the blankets underneath instead of on top."

"I don't know," he answered; "I've never made my own bed. Very few people do in this world, that's why they make such a mess of it when they try."

Billy became serious again.

"I know," she said, "I've tried."

They sat silently for a few minutes. Then Billy turned to her companion.

"Go away, old boy," she said, "I want to think. Go into the Casino and—and lose something."

Jim rose to his feet. There was a great love and a great pity in his heart for this big boy-girl who had made such a mess of her life.

"All right," he said, "I'll stand by."

Billy smiled at him as he strode off. There was something pleasing to her mind in that last phrase of

his. He would "stand by." Yes, that was Jim all over—honest, faithful, helpful, a man to lean on. She felt that she was lucky to have a friend like Jim. A friend? Well, he was more than a friend, he was a brother. A brother? Perhaps more than a brother.

She was glad he was gone though. She wanted to be alone. She wanted to think out what was to be her course of conduct when she got home. The situation certainly looked like becoming an impossible one. She felt that she could not go on indefinitely living with Jerry under existing circumstances. They would presumably have to separate. She couldn't divorce him. She had no reason to suppose that she had any cause to so far as Mrs. D'Arcy was concerned. And then that wasn't enough. Jerry would have to desert her or knock her about. But it was she who had deserted him, and Billy couldn't quite picture Jerry knocking her about.

The thought of it made her smile.

She got up and strolled on to the terrace, and leant over the parapet and gazed at the sea rippling in gentle motion. She was beginning to realize the extent of her folly which had led to such an *impasse*. She herself had forged the fetters which bound her, and she had done so under the impression that she was constructing a ladder of freedom. Was there no way out? She knew what Jim would say:—"Go back to your husband and make the best of him. Cut the other woman out. He is only attracted by her because he can't get you. Be a wife to him, and he will be a lover to you."

A quiver of distaste ran through her. No, she couldn't do that. Her pride wouldn't let her. Besides,

she didn't want Jerry as a lover; he would be impossible in that capacity, he was better as he was.

She wandered into the Casino. Jim was in the Petits Chevaux room. She went up to him.

"I'm going on to the hotel," she said, "see you at dinner."

"All right," he replied, "I'm trying hard to lose a *louis*, but I can't quite do it; when I've succeeded I shall go too."

She proceeded to the hotel, and in a cane chair in the entrance hall she saw Langton.

"Good Lord!" she said.

He rose when he saw her, sure of his welcome.

"I thought I'd have a change of air too," he said.

Billy laughed.

"I see," she replied; "I hope it will do you good. How long are you staying?"

"How long are you?" he answered.

"About twenty-four hours?"

Langton's face fell.

"Oh, come," he said, "the air won't do me much good in twenty-four hours."

The arrival on the scene of Lady Fairborough interrupted their conversation. Langton was introduced, and, of course, invited to join her table at dinner. Billy dressed for dinner that night in a state of mild excitement. Her meeting with Langton had been most startling. It was also rather gratifying to know that he had found London so dull at the end of a week without her that he had felt compelled to come to Dieppe in search of her society.

She wondered what Jim would think when he saw Langton at dinner. Jim had not returned from the

Casino when Billy had gone up to dress, so his first intimation of the arrival of the visitor would probably be when he saw him at table.

And it was.

Jim was late for dinner, and they were all through their soup by the time he arrived. He had not succeeded in losing his *louis*, and, in his endeavours to do so, had made quite a lot of money. When he saw Langton, he simply gasped.

"How do you do," he said; "glad to see you." He would like to have added "drowned."

"I suppose you're staying some time," he continued; "we're going the day after to-morrow." He uttered the last sentence with a spiteful satisfaction.

"I don't know how long I shall stay," replied Langton carelessly; "my movements are uncertain."

"They're certainly unexpected," snapped Jim savagely, helping himself to salt, forgetful of the fact that he had done so twice already.

At first Billy was rather amused by the situation. The strained relations between the two men were quite apparent, although, after their preliminary sparring, they sought to conceal the fact by being painfully polite to each other. The Fairboroughs, who were of course not in the secret, looked on in bewilderment. Taking it all round, dinner was not a satisfactory meal.

It was their custom after dinner to go into the Casino, stroll about the grounds, and sip coffee or liqueurs on the terrace whilst listening to the little band which performed there, with occasional visits to the Petits Chevaux room, though Billy never stayed there

long as it was too stuffy for her taste. They went to the Casino to-night as usual—that is to say, the Fairboroughs, Billy, and Langton—Jim disappeared directly after dinner and left the field clear for the new-comer. It wasn't long before Billy and Langton found themselves alone together. It was a glorious night. The moon was at the full and the sky was ablaze with stars.

"It's just as if heaven had put on her very nicest evening-dress and her best diamonds," remarked Billy. "It's a shame to have only one day more," she added regretfully.

"Yes, it is," he agreed. "But why have only one day more?"

"I thought I told you our time was up," she replied impatiently.

"I thought your time was your own," he answered.

"I don't understand," she said; "you're getting elliptical, Frank—it must be the French air."

Langton laughed.

"I thought my meaning was clear enough," he said. "Why should *we*—go back so soon?"

Billy's eyes sparkled with merriment.

"What!" she said, "stay on here with you? It would be fun though."

"Why not? There's no harm in it. We're both on our own, and as neither of us is particularly anxious to go home why should we?"

"I've a great mind to do it," said Billy; "just to see Jim's face. It would be splendid."

"Oh, bother Jim's face," replied Langton. "It would be a much better reason if you did it in order to see mine."

Billy didn't answer him, but she was beginning to think seriously of the idea which she had at first treated as a joke. After all, why not? Why should she go home yet? Jerry didn't want her, and she didn't want Jerry. Why not stay on here at Dieppe, where she was enjoying herself very much? In the same hotel as Langton? Well, what did that matter? It was a pure coincidence that they had come there, and they were quite independent of each other. It was an unconventional situation. There was nothing new in that; Billy's situations invariably were unconventional. The studio and the skating-rink, even the golf club, would probably not have the sanction of Mrs. Grundy. Besides, who cared for Mrs. Grundy nowadays?

Billy dismissed the subject from her mind for the time being; but that night, when she was in bed, she recurred to it. She usually went to sleep at once, but to-night she was restless. The idea of returning to Queen's Gate became increasingly distasteful on reflection, and the notion of remaining at Dieppe more attractive. She got out of bed and pulled up her blind. The moon was casting a rich orange glow over the water. Billy opened her window and let the sea breeze blow on her. She took a deep breath. Yes, Dieppe was very nice. And Langton was very nice too. She almost made up her mind to stay.

The next day she quite made up her mind. It was rather an unsatisfactory day so far as the Fairborough party was concerned. The arrival of Langton seemed somewhat to have disturbed the symmetry of things. He and Jim were constantly in attendance on Billy,

who was perfectly content in the society of either, but didn't get much fun from the company of both. The Fairboroughs looked on puzzled. They all went to *Aiques-la-Bataille* in the afternoon. Their excursion was really in the nature of a picnic, and ought to have been a thoroughly enjoyable one; but the antagonism prevailing between Langton and Jim, although outwardly repressed, was nevertheless sufficiently apparent to cast a feeling of restraint over the rest of them. Billy felt that the day had been wasted. It was this which probably finally induced her determination.

It was not until dinner that she announced her intentions, and she then did so with characteristic unexpectedness.

"Give my love to London when you see it, Madge," she said to Lady Fairborough.

"Why not give your kind messages yourself?" replied the latter.

"Oh," said Billy, with magnificent carelessness, "I think I shall stay a little longer, the weather's so beautiful."

"But, my dear girl, you'll be so dull here all by yourself," objected Lady Fairborough.

"I should be much more dull at home," replied Billy; "besides, I shan't be all by myself, Frank's not going back just yet."

The calmness with which Billy delivered herself of this announcement, if anything, added to its effect. It completely deprived Jim of the power of speech for the rest of dinner, and Lady Fairborough was too startled by it to remonstrate beyond remarking to Billy, "Do you think you're wise, dear?" to which

Billy promptly and coolly replied, "No. I did once, but I've grown out of that."

Billy spent the rest of the evening in dexterously avoiding a *tête-à-tête* with Jim. She couldn't help it the next morning, however, for he button-holed her immediately after breakfast.

"You're behaving like a fool, Billy," he said.

"Thanks," she replied; "is that anything new?"

"And Langton is behaving like a cad," he continued.

"Oh, leave Frank out," said Billy, colouring slightly.

"I wish the devil you'd leave off calling him 'Frank,'" replied Jim angrily. "You're such an ass that you don't see where you're going; but he does, right enough."

Billy grew angry in her turn.

"See here, Jim," she said, "if you don't know me better than to make insinuations of that kind, you'd better hold your tongue. I'm not a wrong un, and Frank isn't a wrong un either, although you're too stupid to see it."

"I know you're not a wrong un," he replied, "and I don't suppose he means to be, but you're travelling the wrong un's road, and you'd better get off it before you slip."

Billy became herself again.

"You're a good fellow, Jim," she said; "but I'm not worth taking all this trouble about. Go and pack."

But Jim didn't pack. He went out and sent off various telegrams instead, and when the Newhaven steamer started for England it went without him.

Billy and Langton found him at their table at dinner that evening.

"I thought I would stay a little longer too," he remarked.

Jim was "standing by."

CHAPTER XVIII

WHY had Jim done it? Why had he postponed his departure, jeopardized his practice—for barristers cannot hope to retain the confidence of their clients if they are not on the spot—and deliberately created an ill-adjusted party of three, of which two of the elements were discordant? Jim asked himself these questions without obtaining any very satisfactory answers to them. He knew, of course, that he had been actuated by his love for Billy and his desire for her good, but it was a little difficult to see how the fact of making her uncomfortable at Dieppe was going to conduce to her happiness. He had felt that he couldn't leave her there in Dieppe, alone in the same hotel with Langton. Not that he distrusted the morality of either of them, but he had a very poor opinion of their discretion. Left to their own devices, he was sure that they would have done one foolish thing after another until Billy would have become so entangled in a network of scandal that it would be almost impossible to extricate her. But how would his remaining at Dieppe prevent that?

He wasn't sure that it would, but it might delay or, at any rate, mitigate it. He hoped that Billy would reconsider her position, and return home at the end of a week. In the mean time the presence of two men at her table would give it an appearance of commonplace

respectability which would deprive it of all interest for the other occupants of the hotel. He was doubtful how Billy would take his interference in her affairs, but, with greater penetration than he had given her credit for, she realized his motives and appreciated the sacrifice of his professional interests which he was making. She drew him aside after dinner, and seated herself by him in a secluded part of the hotel garden.

"Jim," she said, "go home and do your work."

"I'm doing it here," he replied.

"You're doing nothing of the sort," she answered; "you're merely adding to my responsibilities as well as your own."

"I don't understand," he said.

"I'm spoiling your practice for you, and you're spoiling my holiday for me."

"That's exactly what I intended," said Jim; "it ought to induce you to come home. Now call me a cad if you want to."

"You're not a bit of a cad," she answered, "you're a sort of Don Quixote. I suppose I'm the windmill," she added, laughing. She got out of her chair. She was looking very sweet and fresh and strong. She always looked well in evening-dress, although there was nothing remarkable about the one she was wearing this evening, except that it conveyed the impression of fitting her, not because it was made to but because it liked to.

Jim regarded her admiringly.

"You're a lovely windmill," he said, "Don Quixote would be a fool to leave you."

Billy pulled him out of his chair, and they stood facing each other.

"See here," she said, "this young person—meaning *me*—ain't going to have her holiday spoilt, and she ain't going to ruin a deserving young man's business and send him into the workhouse."

"And how is she going to prevent it?" asked Jim.

Billy put an attractive forefinger by the side of her pretty nose—not an elegant gesture.

"Wait and see," she said.

So Jim waited and saw—the next night, for he dined alone.

He inquired of the waiter for the missing occupants of the table.

"They left to-day, monsieur," replied the man.

"Left to-day," echoed Jim. "Where have they gone to?"

"I will inquire at the office," replied the waiter.

He returned from his mission a few minutes later.

"I do not know, monsieur," he said, "they left no address."

CHAPTER XIX

BILLY ran away with the best motives in the world. She wanted to enjoy herself, and she wanted Jim to go back and do his work. She knew his obstinate character sufficiently well to be sure that, having made up his mind to play the part of watch-dog at Dieppe, he would not have returned to England without her, and she was also sure that merely leaving Dieppe would not be sufficient, for he would have followed her if he had known her whereabouts. Consequently she took care to leave no address. She regarded her clandestine departure with Langton as a huge joke, although she was rather sorry to leave Dieppe; still, there were other places on the map where a week or two could be conveniently spent.

She had no intention of being away from England longer than that, but the "week or two" became extended to three and that period, in its turn, to a month, almost before Billy or Langton became aware of it; *almost* before; they were really aware of it; but they shut their eyes to the flight of time and tried to deceive themselves into forgetfulness. Their conduct was, of course, utterly inexcusable in grown men and women; they had no business at their age to behave like a pair of children, and they ignored the fact that the world would not treat them as such. They were both perfectly honest in their intentions towards each

other, but the world is sceptical in such matters, and they ought to have known it. As a matter of fact, they did know it, but they scoffed at what people might think. Their philosophy was summed up by Billy when she said, " Blow people ! let's be happy ! "

They were certainly that. They both had a thoroughly jolly time, visiting different places together, and indulging in various amusements, from golf to fishing, and they both naturally wanted it to continue as long as possible. Their relations with each other were of the same frank, friendly nature as formerly, there was nothing in the nature of love-making between them, they were just " pals."

At the same time, of course, Billy knew perfectly well that she ought to go home, and Langton knew equally well that he ought never to have come. He had no right to be perpetually on the heels of a pretty young married woman. Even if she wanted him there. Still less under those circumstances. Billy had occasional qualms as to the concealment of her movements. But she stifled them with her usual remedy of procrastination. She would write home to-morrow—and to-morrow—and always to-morrow. After all, writing was a nuisance, and then one never had a pen when one was in the mood for it, or note-paper, or ink, or anything to say. She didn't feel inclined to write about Langton, and there didn't seem to be anything else.

At length Billy remarked that she ought to go home.

" Yes," replied Langton, " I suppose we ought to go back. We might, perhaps, put in two or three days at Le Chalon first."

So they stayed there a week. Le Chalon is a pretty little village on the coast. It did possess an inn, however, chiefly patronized by thirsty tourists on cycling bent. There wasn't much going on at Le Chalon, but Billy and Langton nowadays seemed to find their own society sufficient relaxation. They spent their time chiefly in sailing about in a boat, which they hired from one of the fishermen for a ridiculously small sum, and, when there was no wind, they lounged about and watched the perspiring cyclists. Billy and her "brother"—she had found it convenient to promote Langton to that position—would have been quite content for this kind of existence to continue indefinitely; but at the end of the week Billy roused herself with an effort.

"I must go home," she said with decision; "to-morrow," she added less firmly.

"It's a bit sudden," said Langton; "but I suppose you're right. It's a pity we didn't look in at Étretat; there's golf there."

"I think we might wind up with a little golf at Étretat," said Billy. "I don't suppose a day or two more or less matters."

So they went to Étretat and had a good deal of golf there. There was a competition coming off, and they both agreed that it would be a pity to miss it. So they stayed for it, and, as they were both on the top of their game, they carried all before them, and then it seemed a pity to go home.

"London will be stifling," sighed Billy, "after this."

"So it will," assented Langton cordially, "and this is rather hot. Switzerland's a nice place, I'm told."

Then they both looked into each other's eyes and laughed.

After which they didn't talk any more about going home.

"I'll write to Jerry and explain," said Billy airily.

But of course she didn't write.

So they went to Switzerland, climbed mountains, sailed over lakes, and even got some of their beloved golf at one or two places. They were rather lucky in not coming across any one they knew. That would have been embarrassing even for free-and-easy Billy. They didn't take any trouble to avoid such an event, however, for they followed the beaten track of the average tourist. They did so purposely, for the English people they met were a source of perpetual delight to Billy.

There was one little cockney tourist they came across at their hotel at Interlaken who took her fancy immensely. She got to know him through acting as interpreter for him on one occasion—his French was impossible, and hers was execrable. She learnt that his name was Harris—"'Arris," he pronounced it; he also invariably addressed her as "Miss."

Langton didn't think much of him.

"You have got low tastes," he said to Billy, "taking up with a little bounder like that."

"My dear Frank," she replied, "you're very ungrateful; he thinks a lot of you."

Indeed, Mr. Harris admired Billy's "brother" almost as much as he obviously did herself. He could hardly keep his eyes off him, and constantly spoke of him to Billy in tones of awe.

"Your brother—'e's an artist, isn't 'e, miss?" he asked her one day.

"Yes," replied Billy, "a great artist."

"'E don't seem to do much paintin'," he commented.

"No," said Billy, smothering a laugh; "he's rather too great an artist for that."

A day or two later the little man went away.

"I 'ope we shall meet again, miss," he said.

"I 'ope so too," replied Billy, omitting the aspirate from infectious sympathy.

"There's nothing so catching as dropping things!" she explained later to Langton when describing the incident.

And so the summer slipped by until the days began perceptibly to shorten, and even Billy to realize that her unconventional holiday must shortly come to an end. She had, of course, known that the pleasant state of existence which she and Langton had created for themselves could not continue indefinitely, but she had dismissed the thought from her mind whenever it had entered there. Such reflections seemed out of harmony with lakes and mountains and sunshine, so she postponed them until they should have a more suitable setting. That time arrived one day in September, when Billy awoke to the sound of running water. It was not the familiar splash of the pretty little waterfall which tumbled tumultuously out of the mountain-side into the lake not far from her bedroom window, but torrents of rain which streamed over land and water and blotted out everything but itself from view. Billy came downstairs in a somewhat discontented frame of mind. It was going to be a thoroughly wet day, and a wet day inside a Swiss lakeside hotel is probably

slightly more unsatisfactory than anywhere else—except outside it.

Billy and Langton spent the morning in telling each other, with diminishing degrees of conviction, that the weather was going to clear up, and the early part of the afternoon in professing not to care whether it did or not. Finally Billy declared that she would make a virtue of necessity and write letters. She sat down with an ample supply of pens, ink, and paper, but with a complete paucity of ideas.

She commenced letters to her mother, to Lady Fairborough, to Winnie, to Jim, to Jerry—but she tore them all up before she had half completed them. Langton was in all of them, she couldn't keep him out; when she tried to, she found herself biting the handle of her pen, and with nothing to say.

She had never realized until that moment quite how completely he had entered into her life. Her whole existence seemed to have become dependent upon his. If she went anywhere, it was with him; if she did anything it was with him; he it was to whom her conversation was exclusively addressed; he it was upon whom her thoughts were entirely directed. She glanced at him furtively. He was standing smoking by the hotel window watching the driving rain outside. He looked a splendid type of Englishman in his neat knickerbocker suit, which showed off his athletic figure to the best advantage. He turned whilst she was looking at him, and jerked his pipe in the direction of the window.

"Rotten, ain't it?" he said.

She nodded acquiescence, but at the moment she wasn't thinking of the weather. She was thinking of

him. She was thinking how " rotten " it was that she had not met him sooner, how " rotten " it was that their jaunt must soon be over, and how fearfully " rotten " she would feel without him.

He seemed to have unconsciously followed her thoughts, for his handsome face clouded, and he flung himself into a chair at her side.

" I suppose," he said, " this is the end of everything. I don't like the last act."

" Ugh," replied Billy ; " it's beastly."

There was nothing in the words, but there was something in the way she said them which came as a revelation to Langton. He got up and leant over the back of her chair.

" Do you feel like that too ? " he said.

He spoke almost in a whisper, and his voice shook with emotion. She looked up into his face, and she saw something in his eyes which she had never seen before.

And he saw something in hers.

CHAPTER XX

Both loving; each seeing that the other loved; neither knowing that the other knew; that was the position.

A word of amplification is, perhaps, desirable. Billy had discovered that she loved Langton and that he loved her. He also had learnt that he loved her and that his love was returned. Doubtless, the knowledge had been dawning on them for some time, but it was that wet day in the Swiss hotel which brought revelation to them both. Their eyes had betrayed their souls, but their minds were unaware of the treachery. Hence it was that Billy revelled in her love for Langton and in the knowledge that he loved her, as ignorant of the fact that he knew she loved him as he was ignorant of the fact that she knew he loved her. They both delighted in the secret of the other which they had discovered—and resolved that it should remain a secret. With that end in view, they put a guard upon their tongues, which had hitherto been free and unconstrained. That it was which spoiled their friendship.

For it did spoil their friendship. It completely altered the relationship between them. Their intimate knowledge of each other destroyed their intimacy. Formerly, they passed their time in each other's society, talking or not as the mood pleased them.

Now, pauses became awkward for the first time, silence unendurable; they felt that they must talk to prevent exposing their thoughts, and they talked artificially in an endeavour to conceal them. All of which, be it said, was greatly to their credit. They were trying to keep their footing on the "Wrong 'un's road." Of course they should never have got on it. Well, they hadn't meant to. Billy, at any rate, had been warned? Even the traveller who is warned sometimes loses his way.

Love is supposed, except by cynics, to make the person afflicted happy. That may or may not be, but it is not the case when it is suppressed. Billy and Langton now found themselves compelled to pass their time in sitting on the escape-valve of their emotions—an uncomfortable state of things in which it is difficult to preserve one's moral equilibrium. It was under these circumstances that October arrived, and they proceeded to dawdle homewards. It was quite clear that their unorthodox holiday had got to come to an end; indeed, even the weather, hitherto their sympathetic ally, except on one memorable occasion which has been mentioned, had now deserted them. "Deserted" is perhaps hardly the right word, for, as if to make up for having so long smiled on them, it now scowled, and stormed, and raged, and turned a very cold shoulder on them indeed—and a very wet one into the bargain.

They put in a week at Paris. Paris, like London, has charms irrespective of the climate, and thence they proceeded to Rouen for a couple of days *en route* for Dieppe. They had decided to return, as they had come, by the Newhaven route.

"This is what you call 'a vicious circle,' isn't it?" queried Billy, as she stepped out of the train.

"I suppose our *friends* would call it so," replied Langton; "but I've heard that even a circle can be squared."

They didn't stay at the Hôtel des Bains on this occasion, but at a less pretentious one. They had it almost to themselves. In late October—at any rate when it is wet—Dieppe does not attract holiday-makers. Indeed, the little place presented a thoroughly depressed appearance; it had ceased to be a seaside resort, and had become a mere sea-port. For the last fortnight it had rained steadily, the golf links were sodden, the casino was closed, and, as Billy described it, "it was *wery* dull and smelt of fish."

There was certainly no attraction at Dieppe to keep Billy and Langton there—except themselves. But that seemed to be sufficient. At any rate, they lingered on from day to day. One of their chief occupations was to watch the English boat out and to propose, with varying degrees of firmness, to take the next one; and another—or rather the other—was to take long walks in the rain. They liked these walks, the exercise was stimulating, the presence of each other was sympathetic, and there was no occasion to talk, or if there was they had to shout on account of the wind. They liked shouting, it was such a thoroughly safe mode of conversation; nobody has ever been known to shout his love; love may break people's hearts, but it will never strain their lungs.

And gradually their disagreeable climatic environment dispelled the caution which they had hitherto observed, and gave them a sense of security in each

other's society. The weather, in fact, acted as a sort of chaperon. Indeed, it resembled many that one wots of in its characteristics.

Romance is not usually associated with mackintoshes. And yet it was in mackintoshes and pouring rain that Billy and Langton culminated theirs. They had gone for their usual walk on the cliffs at the back of the town, and stood for a moment watching the English packet as it faded from view in a mist of rain. They turned to continue their walk, and Billy slipped on the wet, chalky soil. Langton put out his hand to prevent her falling, and she recovered herself with his support. But the mischief was done. Their sense of touch conquered their sense of right and wrong, overwhelmed their good intentions towards each other, swept away the artificial barriers they had reared between them—and they were in each other's arms in a passionate embrace before they realized what they were doing. For one long, wonderful moment; and then they separated, withdrew of their own simultaneous volition. For a minute they stood, silent but not confused, whilst the rain thrashed their faces, and the wind moaned in their ears.

Billy was the first to speak.

"The end of the last act," she said.

Langton tugged at his moustache, whilst a doleful expression came into his face, which made him look curiously boyish in spite of his commanding physique.

"I suppose so," he replied; "I wish it were the first."

Billy laughed—she wasn't feeling exactly merry, but Langton's rueful countenance was irresistible.

"Poor old boy!" she said; "and poor me!" she added.

She kicked a stone over the cliff side; it rebounded from point to point until it reached the beach below.

"*That* would be *your* last act," she said.

He nodded acquiescence, and they turned and walked back to their hotel. They didn't speak until they arrived there. Then he turned to her on the steps.

"I never meant you to know," he said.

"Nor did I," she replied, and went straight up to her room.

She sat down in a chair by her window. She wanted to collect her thoughts, to straighten things out in her mind, to face the situation, to see exactly where she was, to decide exactly what she was going to do. Billy was not a fool, but she frankly admitted to herself that she had behaved like one. Neither was she a knave, though she admitted to herself—less frankly—that she had acted not unlike one. Those, however, were matters of idle if not uninteresting philosophy. The urgent, insistent question was what was she going to do? She pondered long and inconclusively; she walked up and down and kicked things; she wondered whether Langton was doing the same, dear Frank!—and that made her thoughts wander more than ever.

Her head buzzed. She went to the washstand and bathed her face. Ah, that was better, there was nothing like cold water for a heated brain. She began purposely to occupy herself with trivial tasks with a view to restoring herself to her normal calm. She started tidying things—she had ample scope, for Billy's room might

fitly be labelled " chaos " after the shortest occupation. It was whilst she was engaged in arranging the things on her mantelpiece that her eyes alighted on the photograph of Jim, which she had brought with her. Dear old Jim! What would he say if he knew? She wished he did know. He would have sworn a bit, but he would have helped. His advice was always sound, and she wanted sound advice.

Then a sort of shiver passed through her. She knew what Jim would say:—"You're on the wrong path, get off it; you love the wrong man, leave him; you must never see him again."

"You must never see him again," she said the words to herself in a whisper, emphasizing them as if she were stabbing something with each of them—as indeed she was. She sat down again in her chair. She felt faint. But she also felt that she had found the answer to her problem. Oh, but it was a cruel answer. Yes, but the only one. She couldn't do it. She wouldn't do it. She must do it. She couldn't. She must!

She began to dress for dinner.

She had never looked more beautiful than she looked that night, or more composed. Quieter? Yes. There was a light in her eyes, but it was not the light of laughter; that danced, this remained steady; it was the light of determination.

Langton was surprised to see her looking so animated. He had expected—well, he hardly knew what he had expected. He, too, had had a somewhat troubled time since his return to the hotel. With him it didn't take the form of tidying his room. He walked about outside in the rain, smoked furiously, and got

his feet wet. Poor Langton ! He wasn't a bad fellow, but he had got a bit out of his depth, and he had no conception as to how he should get within it again, and no clearly defined idea as to whether he wanted to or not. He wasn't particularly moral, nor particularly wicked, certainly not particularly clever ; so he just smoked until his tobacco burnt his tongue, and the hot ashes in his pipe sizzled from the rain which dripped on to them from the peak of his cap.

He wondered what Billy was thinking about. He hoped of him. Awfully wrong, of course ; but still, awfully nice. How splendid she was, her face, her figure, her laugh, her voice, all of her ! And she loved him ; that was the most splendid part of all ! Oh yes, awfully wrong ; but not in her ; yes, no, certainly not. Well, *he* was in the wrong, anyway. Oh yes, that was granted ; but he was a sinner for her sake, and she was worth being a bit of a sinner for. Besides, he wasn't a sinner really ; nor was she ; one kiss doesn't make a sinner. He mused on in the rain whilst his pipe bubbled in sympathy. He smoked himself at last into a state of mental content and moral justification. He couldn't help it. Men are like that.

But Billy altered all that after dinner. She drew him into the glass-covered veranda, on the roof of which the rain pattered with monotonous persistence.

" We can be alone here," she said, " and I want to say good-bye."

" Good-bye ? " he echoed her words in a confused stammer, as he dropped into a seat by her side.

" Yes," she replied, " to-day has been the awakening. With me it must be always or never."

For some moments there was silence between them,

except for the raindrops, which seemed to repeat the words she had uttered.

Then Langton leaned across to Billy, and took her hand in his. Hers was like a stone, his like fire.

"Why not—always?" he whispered. "Oh, Billy," he continued, "think what it means to both of us if you finish it all up now; think what you're giving up; think what you're going back to. God! no, don't think, don't let either of us think, let's just——"

"No," interrupted Billy, in the calm, even voice she had spoken in previously, "let's just not. See here, Frank, I love you. I've loved you for some time, but I thought I could love you and play the game" —her voice broke a little. "I find I can't," she continued hurriedly, "and it's a case of good-bye. Yes, it is, it *is*. Oh! don't make things worse for me than they are. I married Jerry; I don't love him, and he don't love me; we're both at liberty to go as we please within certain limits—but this is outside the radius."

Langton got up and stood looking down on her, half puzzled, half admiring. He felt she was right. He wanted to do the right thing—if he could.

"You mean," he said, "that it isn't cricket."

"That's it," she replied.

Then they said good-bye.

CHAPTER XXI

THE next day dawned grey and muggy. The rain had stopped, but the whole place was sloppy and everything looked moist and mournful. The only thing that didn't appear depressed was the *Brighton*, as she lay alongside the quay, with her trim white funnels and her holystoned decks; but even her smartness was mitigated by the union jack, which hung at her stern in despondent, damp folds, with never a wag in one of them.

It was a sorry setting for the finish of Billy's romance. And yet, perhaps, not an unsuitable one. Billy felt this as she stepped across the puddles on her way to the telegraph office to wire to Jerry—"Home to dinner."

A very flat finale; nothing heroic about it.

She had felt a wee bit heroic the night before when she had said good-bye. The situation had lent itself to dramatic effect and she had been rather carried away by it. But in the morning it was different. There is an element of romance in farewells, but there is only the infinitely prosaic about packing and writing luggage labels. You can't be soulful when you are irritated—and you can hardly fail to be irritated when, having carefully locked and strapped your box, you find that you have left a pair of boots under the bed. Billy's packing was of the tumultuous, go-as-you-please,

trust-to-luck and heaven-help-the-hinges order; that is to say, she turned everything out of everywhere on to the floor, turned everything off the floor (that she didn't forget) into her box and then jumped on the lid. It was an effective method of packing in her case, for she was fairly heavy; it wasn't particularly good for the clothes nor the box, but then, as she used to say, "one could always get new ones." Billy never objected to spending money, she had plenty of it.

At last the packing and the luggage labels and all the little incidental irritations of going away were finished, and Billy was able to sit down and review the result of her exertions. Now that she had nothing to do except twiddle her thumbs, or talk to Langton until it should be time for the boat to start, she began to feel very down in the mouth indeed. She didn't want to talk to Langton—she had done that last night. Then they had said good-bye; there was to be no affectionate leave-taking to-day; there were to be no more tender passages; all that was finished.

She stayed up in her room until it was time for lunch. She felt that the situation as it at present existed between her and Langton was intolerable. They must be all in all to each other or nothing; the days of platonics were over. After to-day she would banish him from her sight. She couldn't banish him from her mind, however. As she sat up there in her disordered bedroom amongst her luggage, her thoughts dwelt on him and on him only. Still, she didn't regret her decision. She felt that it was the only thing to do. With all her faults, Billy was a straight, clean-minded girl, there was nothing mean about her; she had gone about with Frank Langton and had enjoyed herself in

his society because her contract with Jerry entitled her to do so. It did not entitle her to do more, and she had found herself impelled by her emotions to do considerably more. Then she had recovered herself, pulled herself up on the brink, and adopted the sharp, decisive and obviously right method of saving the situation, by abolishing it. A bit late perhaps? Well, too late to be pleasant, but not too late to be possible.

And so she was going back to-day, and alone. Langton might follow or not, as he pleased. They had agreed that it was best so. If they had to part, Billy preferred that they should do so in the place which had witnessed the conclusion of their relations rather than that in which they had begun. Besides, she was shutting a book which she had no intention of ever re-opening. It would be easier for her to carry out that intention if she left the book in France.

She went down to lunch. It was a melancholy meal, and both she and Langton soon gave up the task of pretending that it was not.

"The world is flat," said Billy. "I don't care what anybody says."

"Yes," he agreed, "and hollow."

They strolled down to the boat together.

"Queen Mary said that 'Calais' would be found written on her heart," she remarked; "in my case it will be 'Dieppe.'"

It was Billy's final effort to be cheerful; but it was a dismal failure, probably because she got no support from Langton who was thoroughly in the dumps.

The train from Paris ran in and the usual busy scene of embarkation began. Langton went on board with Billy. He wanted to be as near her as he could

up to the last. He wanted to talk to her, but the thoughts which confusedly clamoured in his brain refused to form themselves into words. So together they leaned over the vessel's side, silent, constrained, whilst unemotional cranes stretched out their long arms laden with passengers' luggage, which was swallowed up by the steamer as if it were some monster which lived upon that particular kind of food.

At last it was time to go. The captain was on the bridge, various bells had rung, whistles sounded, every one who did not intend to cross was leaving for the shore; Langton still lingered.

"Now, sir, *if* you're coming," shouted a voice with official emphasis.

He turned to the woman he was losing.

Billy suddenly felt a great lump rise in her throat. She sat down on a seat; she felt she was going to faint. She half closed her eyes, but tried to smile and hold out her hand.

Langton noticed her emotion.

"My God!" he murmured in a broken voice, and, turning from her quickly, made for the gangway without taking her hand. She watched him push his way through the little crowd of loungers on the quay-side, and then he strode away without looking back. Well, this was not the time to wave handkerchiefs.

Billy remained sitting where she was as the *Brighton* pushed her way down the harbour between the piers and out to the sea which stirred in oily motion beyond. It must have been nearly an hour before Billy moved, but so far as she was concerned it might have been a minute. Her leave-taking had numbed her faculties, it had been worse than she had expected; she had

imagined that she had got over it the previous night; she now realized that it had only just begun. With an effort she roused herself and began to pace the deck.

Up and down! Up and down! Who was this tall, beautiful, young woman with her persistent stride and her preoccupied air? It was a question which many of the passengers asked themselves as they tried to pass the time during the long and somewhat monotonous crossing. They imagined that this impatient young person who couldn't keep still must be in a great hurry to get home.

The English coast appeared lying grey and misty in the distance. Billy came to a standstill beside one of the crew and watched it as it approached. It was her home. Unconsciously she laughed aloud. It was a short, bitter, little laugh. The sailor heard it and turned towards her.

"Home, sweet home! miss," he said.

"Yes," she answered; "there's no place like it, is there?"

He didn't notice the irony in her voice nor the drawn look on her face.

"No, miss," he said; "that's what I tell the missis. I ain't away long—only a few hours—but that's what I thinks whenever I sees the English coast. That's what I thinks," he added, as he turned away to his work.

The steamer sidled up to the quay. There was the usual miscellaneous throwing of ropes, clanking of chains and outpouring of steam from unexpected holes in the vessel's side, confused passengers looking for their hand-luggage, taking up the wrong bags, having

the said bags swiftly wrested from their hands by other indignant passengers, firmly convinced that the first were luggage thieves of the worst type; a more or less lost child—that is to say, lost every other minute—and a completely lost dog who ran about looking for his owner, got into everybody's way and was perpetually being trodden on.

The inevitable English scramble at the gangways ensued. There was no occasion for hurry, the passengers had to go through the custom-house and the train wouldn't leave until they had done so. That makes no difference to the average English man or woman. He or she will be calm under ordinary circumstances and frequently in extraordinary ones, even danger often fails to disturb their stolidity; but, put them within sight of a gangway and "Nulli Secundus!" they inwardly ejaculate, rush, trample, drop things, lose their tickets, and finally emerge breathless, jostled but triumphant at the other side in about double the time which they would have occupied had they employed less energy. Billy watched the familiar scene from the upper deck. She was in no particular hurry to disembark. The boat was her last link with France. She was the last passenger to leave it. She felt, as her feet touched English soil, that that was the moment of her real farewell.

The exigencies of ticket-collectors, custom-house officials and porters, and the necessity of finding a carriage did more to restore her to her customary self than anything else, and, as she leant back in her seat and watched the people hurrying by on the platform, or badgering politely bored officials with ridiculous questions, the events of the last few hours began to

recede in her mind until they almost seemed to have occurred in the remote past. She was not permitted to remain long alone with her thoughts, however, for her carriage was invaded at the last moment by an old lady who had delayed the train's departure for nearly five minutes by losing the key of her travelling-trunk, which the custom-house firmly insisted upon opening.

"That's the worst of travelling without a maid," she explained to Billy. "At least, I don't know," she added, "I should probably have lost her as well."

She was a conversational old soul. She didn't care much what she talked about so long as she talked, and she had a curious habit of invariably qualifying the first part of a sentence by something in the second which rendered the whole devoid of point. Billy became quite interested in her at last.

"It *is* so nice to be back in England," burbled the talkative one; "amongst the green fields and the blue sky" (the fields were a dirty green and the sky a still more dirty grey), "*and* the cows. There's something about an English cow you never find anywhere else—although," she continued contemplatively, "I believe most of them come from Jersey."

And so on over a wide range of subjects.

Talking apparently made her thirsty.

"Are you fond of tea?" she asked suddenly.

She didn't wait for an answer, but rummaged in a basket and produced a resplendent spirit-stove, with various glittering *etceteras*.

"I always take this abroad with me," she explained. "It's the only way to get a cup of tea; but I never can light it," she went on, "the spirit's bad. It's the duty, you know," she added vaguely.

She managed to light it all right on this occasion, anyhow, and she nearly set the carriage on fire into the bargain. Neither she nor Billy got any tea, however, as the old lady finally recollected that that was in her box in the van. She cheered up though when she remembered that she had emphatically stated to the custom-house people that she had nothing to declare, and the reflection that she was a successful smuggler of tea more than consoled her for the loss of it.

The journey from Newhaven to London is not normally a long one, but the train in which Billy travelled was continually being pulled up by signal checks. By the time they got to Croydon she learnt the reason, for it became apparent that they were running into a fog. They pursued their halting way amidst a chorus of lugubrious howls from the engine and startling reports of fog signals until the old lady got into an acute state of nerves, doubtless accentuated by the absence of her tea.

"Do you think we shall run into anything?" she asked Billy.

"Apparently not London," replied the latter, who was beginning to feel quite done up with the combined effects of her journey and the events of the day.

Victoria was reached at last, however—at least both the porters and the train seemed to be under that impression; but, so far as Billy could see of it, it might have been Timbuctoo. London was buried in fog, not the pea-soup variety, but the genuine black, grimy, gritty article that gets down your throat, up your nose, and into your ears. Billy clutched hold of a porter and demanded a cab. The porter was sceptical as to his ability to find one, but a shilling put fresh hope into

his heart. Eventually he did find one, a fourwheeler, it looked like a creature of fog ; the driver might have been the father of fog—judging by his voice—and his horse had apparently been fed on it. Billy gave her address to the foggy cabman.

" Do you know where it is ? " she asked.

" No," he replied ; " but I know where it was this morning."

The porter laughed a foggy laugh.

" If it don't move faster than you do," he said, " I expect it's there still."

He shut the door of the cab and Billy drew up the windows and covered her mouth with her handkerchief. " Home, sweet home," the sailor had called it. Ugh !

The cab jolted its way out of the station and into the confused roar of the streets, mysterious lights loomed and disappeared, shouts echoed from apparently nowhere and would have conveyed the impression of being spirit voices but for the language which was intensely human. The cabman got down and began to lead his horse, Billy only knew it because he came to the door to tell her so. Somehow or other they got into Sloane Street, and there they were lucky enough to encounter a link boy by literally running into him. He was saved from being trampled on by the horse because the latter had a not unnatural objection to having his hair singed. Billy chartered the lad with the torch, and, thus escorted, the cab wended its funereal way to Queen's Gate. She had been too occupied with the moving incidents of her journey to consider what manner of reception awaited her when she reached its end, and she was too fagged out when she arrived to think of anything but changing her

clothes and having a hot bath. She was evidently expected, for she found the door open when she mounted the steps; some one must have heard the cab draw up. She went into the hall and closed the door, through which the fog was streaming into the house.

Then she noticed a man standing there. He was a stranger to her.

"Mrs. Aynesworth, I think?" he said.

"Yes," she replied, "that is my name; but who are you?"

He held out a folded paper.

"I was asked to give you this," he answered.

She ran her eye carelessly over the document.

It was Jerry's petition for divorce, and Langton was the co-respondent.

It was a moment or two before she fully comprehended. There was no change in her manner when she did so, though her heart seemed to stop its beating and then to redouble it. She gathered up all her courage, called upon all her resources to show no sign of emotion before this stranger, who was watching her curiously.

She handed him back the paper, opened the door and pointed to the fog.

"This is not the First of April!" she said.

CHAPTER XXII

It is desirable to hark back a bit. Between Billy's departure and her return home much had happened. She had left in circumstances of domestic agitation, but the world had only taken a mild and languid interest in her affairs. When she came back, she walked into a veritable maelstrom. A word of explanation seems necessary.

Her delayed return at first caused no comment. Jerry, indeed, was unaware that she had delayed it. He knew that she had gone to Dieppe with Lady Fairborough, but he didn't know how long she intended to stay there. She didn't write to him, which caused him neither surprise nor disappointment; and he didn't write to her, which was equally natural. He was under the impression that she was still with Lady Fairborough, when he came across that lady upon the steps of his house. She was inquiring for Billy at the door, and Jerry heard her express her regret at the servant not knowing Billy's address. She turned to leave as Jerry came up the steps.

"You seem to have mislaid my wife," he said jovially.

Lady Fairborough flushed slightly. Billy's continued absence from home was making her uneasy.

"No one can undertake to be responsible for Billy's movements," she said lightly; "not even herself."

She hurried off. She didn't wish to commit herself with Jerry. She wasn't aware how much he knew or didn't know. But she didn't feel at all assured about Billy.

Then Mrs. Mervyn took to calling, and Mabel Cartright, and Jim, and, of course, others.

"My wife seems to be in great request," remarked Jerry to Mrs. D'Arcy one night, when the subject of Billy cropped up.

"Yes," said Mrs. D'Arcy significantly, "especially by Mr. Langton; but *he* doesn't seem to have called."

It was the sort of remark she missed no opportunity of making. But things could not drift on indefinitely in this way. Even Jerry was roused out of his indifference at last, partly by Mrs. Holroyd, partly by Jim. Mrs. Holroyd came up from Beachaven specially to see Billy—the Holroyds had bought Sunny Bank.

"Where's Billy?" she wailed. "She hasn't written to me for weeks. Where is she?"

She addressed herself emphatically to Jerry.

"Tell me where she is," she said; "you must know; you ought to know; it's your business to know."

But Jerry merely fidgeted about on either leg, twiddled his moustache, and didn't know. Finally he nearly fidgeted Mrs. Holroyd into a fit and did succeed in fidgeting her out of the house. That night Jim called again, he had got into the habit now of doing so daily. Jerry was in when he called and asked him into the library. He was beginning to get a bit uneasy about Billy himself, and Jim was the nearest approach to a common bond between them that existed.

Moreover, Jerry liked Jim and Jim liked Jerry.

It was not extraordinary that Jerry should like Jim, because most people did; Jim was decidedly likeable. But it was, perhaps, rather surprising that Jim should like Jerry. In the first place, Jim was a manly man and Jerry was hardly a man at all. In the second place, Jim was in love with Billy and Jerry had married her. Nevertheless, Jim did like Jerry; he perceived that there were many good points in the little man, good points which Billy might have developed, but which, instead, she had done her best to eradicate. Jim had always sympathized in his heart with Jerry when the latter had made himself appear absurd in Billy's eyes by falling in love with her, had realized how keenly Jerry must have felt Billy's treatment of him, and could even dimly perceive excuses for his conduct with regard to Mrs. D'Arcy. Jim knew that Jerry was weak and that Mrs. D'Arcy was strong. He was also perfectly certain that Jerry had only fallen under her influence because Billy had raised in him the desire for feminine sympathy but had failed to supply the article herself. Jim had set himself the task of bringing about satisfactory relations between Billy and her husband. He had been actuated in this course by his love for her. He had failed in achieving happiness by not marrying her; but it gave him no satisfaction to know that she had failed in obtaining it by not marrying him. He wanted her to be happy, and, if she by her own wilful act had made her matrimonial path necessarily rough, he was more than ever determined to make it smooth. He hadn't been particularly successful up to now. He had tackled Billy and Langton without obtaining any good results. There remained Jerry. Jim had an inspiration as he

followed the latter into the library. He would make Jerry bring about the reconciliation. He must make love to his wife again. It is true that Billy had objected to the treatment before, but that was prior to Mrs. D'Arcy appearing upon the scene. That was a factor which had altered the situation considerably. Thus Jim reflected, and he forthwith proceeded to attempt to carry out his ideas.

Jerry speedily gave him the opportunity.

"I wonder where Billy is," he said.

"Do you want her back?" inquired Jim in his most subtle manner.

"Of course I do; do you know where she is?"

"No; but I know why she won't come back."

"Oh, do you? Perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me?"

"Well," said Jim, "it's the other lady."

Jerry looked puzzled.

"Oh," he said, "you mean Mrs. D'Arcy. You're quite wrong; Billy isn't that sort."

"All women are that sort," replied Jim; "a woman can't stand having her nose put out of joint by another woman."

Jerry laughed.

"My dear man," he said, "Billy's not jealous."

"I didn't say she was," retorted Jim; "but she ain't comfortable at home, and that's why she won't come back, and I can't say that I blame her."

"I suppose she's been talking to you," said Jerry; "but I don't quite see when. It only happened the other day and she went off in a deuce of a hurry."

"I know," replied Jim; "but I came across her at Dieppe."

Jerry became interested.

"Did you?" he said. "Was she very down on me?"

Jim laughed.

"Well, rather," he answered.

He got out of his chair and paced the room. After a few moments he stopped opposite Jerry.

"Look here, Jerry," he said, "I believe you can put matters right yourself if you like; she only wants a lead."

"Rot!" said Jerry.

"I tell you it isn't rot. You do care for her, don't you?"

Jerry fidgeted petulantly in his chair. Jim was very much in earnest, and he had a habit of looking people straight in the eye when he was in earnest. Jerry grew uncomfortable under his gaze.

"No," he snapped, at length; "I don't care for her—at least, not in the way you mean. I did once, but that's all over. I'm not going to let myself in for that sort of thing again."

Jim's face broke into a smile.

"Good!" he said. "I see you do really care after all, although you won't admit it. I tell you, Jerry, I'm awfully keen on you two hitting it off together again."

Jerry laughed rather feebly.

"We shall never do that," he said; "in the mean time, where is she?"

"The Lord knows," replied Jim quickly. "She left the hotel before I did."

"And went off on her own?" queried Jerry.

"Well, I didn't see her start, so I can't say,"

equivocated the other. "However, you'll be hearing from her before long, then write and say you're feeling lonely without her."

"I don't know so much about that," replied Jerry.

Jim departed homewards feeling not unsatisfied with himself. He had sown the seed and, although the soil might not at first sight appear promising, he had hopes of a harvest. He was quite sure that Jerry did in his heart really care for Billy; but then, of course, Jim could not be expected to understand anybody not doing so. As for Billy's views on the matter, he knew that she had found the present state of things unbearable and he concluded that she would welcome a change.

As to whether or not Jim's words directed Jerry's sentiments towards Billy into a more tender channel is open to doubt, but they certainly made him thoughtful. He hadn't realized before that his conduct had driven her from home and was keeping her away. His reflections on the subject made him preoccupied when next he was with Mrs. D'Arcy. That lady was not long in ascertaining the cause of his mental disturbance. She speedily extracted from him, by judicious cross-examination, a full account of his interview with Jim. She then, to his great surprise, became quite sympathetic on Billy's behalf.

"Poor dear!" she said, "we've been very thoughtless and now we must make up for it and give her a real welcome home. But the first thing to do is to find her."

She paused for a moment in reflection. Jerry felt that he had done Mrs. D'Arcy a grave injustice, he had always thought that she hadn't liked Billy—and no

wonder after the way Billy had treated her; but here she was heaping coals of fire on Billy's head—or rather, wishing to. Mrs. D'Arcy turned to him with a smile of inspired benevolence.

"I know," she said. "Detectives!"

"Detectives!" echoed Jerry.

"Yes," she replied; "they'll find her, and then you can write to her."

So Jerry went to Slazenger's, the famous private inquiry agents, and gave them instructions to find his wife. And thus it was that he learnt that Billy was trotting about the Continent with Langton, who was posing as her brother.

After which things came with a rush.

Further inquiries revealed the frequent visits to the studio and the hundred and one indiscretions to which Billy and Langton had committed themselves. As revelation succeeded revelation, Jerry was reduced almost to a state of hysteria. He couldn't believe it of her, he couldn't help believing it of her, it was completely unnatural, it was perfectly natural, it was highly improbable, it was absolutely conclusive, he hated her, he loved her. He swore and he wept.

Then Blanche took him in hand.

There was only one thing for him to do, he must divorce her; oh yes, he must, it was his duty, he owed it to his family, to his father and to her—Blanche; the honour of the family was at stake and it was in his keeping—and hers, Blanche's; it didn't matter whether he liked it or not, *he had got to do it.*

So said Blanche.

Then other members of the family began to put in their oars. They sympathized with Jerry, they

advised him, they coaxed him, they bullied him, they commanded him. Yes, he must do his duty, painful though it be; he owed it to himself and to them—especially to them.

And so Jerry was forced into the ring, a most unwilling combatant, but by no means the first who has been made to put up his fists against his will.

And Mrs. D'Arcy? She behaved with admirable discretion. She stayed outside the ropes. She did nothing, but waited upon events. They could hardly fail to benefit her. In any case, Billy would have a bad time of it—and Mrs. D'Arcy wanted that. And should Jerry succeed in his petition; well, she was a widow—and you never know your luck.

Billy's relations were affected by a varied assortment of emotions in which consternation, indignation, and incredulity in turn triumphed. Mrs. Holroyd deplored Billy's indiscretion, but, with the assistance of *eau de Cologne* and her family bible, was convinced of her innocence. Mr. Holroyd, when he heard the news, received the sort of shock he would have done had he learnt that Consols had dropped to sixty. In such a case, however, he would have believed in their ultimate recovery—and so he regarded Billy.

Sydney, needless to say, became an aggressive partisan of his sister's cause; but excitement at the prospect of a fight was the emotion which overpowered all others in his case.

As for Jim?

He first learnt the position of affairs from Blanche, who had promptly taken over the direction of them.

He just sat down and gasped.

"But it can't be," he said; "oh, it's simply ridiculous. Wait till she comes back."

"That's exactly what we are doing," Blanche replied grimly.

"But it's all a mistake; she'll make everything clear then," he continued.

"She has made everything clear now," said Blanche, and declined to discuss the subject further. She, moreover, refused to let Jim see Jerry, and a few days later carried off her brother to Sutcliffe Park, where she felt she could more effectually prevent any wavering in his resolution—or rather, *hers*—"to do his duty" and to vindicate "the honour of the family."

So Jim wrote a note to Billy which he left at her house to be delivered to her when she returned home, after which he endeavoured to possess his soul in patience—an attempt in which he signally failed.

Jim's note was short and to the point. It ran:—"Come and see me before you do anything. Jim." Billy read it in the foggy hall on the night of her arrival. Dear old Jim! Always at hand to help in time of trouble. She put down his letter with rather a hopeless smile. She felt that she was badly in need of help just then. She called on him in the Temple the next day and found him in, though she hardly expected to do so as she thought he might be in court. His face lighted up when he saw her.

"Good," he said. "I'm so glad you've come back. Now you can explain everything."

"It takes a bit of explaining," she answered, and she handed him the divorce petition. He wheeled forward an armchair for her and then proceeded to

study the document. It was rather a long one, and its perusal didn't seem to give him much satisfaction.

"But this is absurd," he said, when he had finished. "There are about twenty charges, all over the place too—at the studio, Dieppe, Etretat, Interlaken; Billy! What on earth have you been up to?"

"Playing the fool," she responded laconically. "Oh, of course, I can explain it all right, but it's a bit rotten having to do so in court. Shall I have to go into court, Jim?"

"Unless you can get hold of Jerry," he answered.

Billy flushed.

"I can't," she replied. "Blanche has done that. I've been talking to her this morning over the telephone."

She gave a bitter little laugh and continued—

"I reckon that between us we made the wires hot."

Jim got out of his chair impatiently.

"My dear girl," he said, "I told you to come to me before you did anything."

"My dear Jim," she replied, "I wouldn't have missed that little conversation with Blanche for worlds. She says the honour of the family is in her hands—if it stays there much longer she'll ruin the varnish."

"Did you tell her that?"

"Something like it, only more so," replied Billy complacently.

Jim threw up his hands with a gesture of despair. He wasn't much of a diplomatist himself, but Billy was hopeless.

Billy settled herself more comfortably in her chair.

"Now, Father Confessor," she said, "I'll tell you all about it."

She commenced the story of her peregrinations, whilst Jim listened with attentive but ever-lengthening face. Suddenly he started.

"Stop!" he exclaimed. "Don't tell me any more. I forgot. They know I was at Dieppe. Good Lord! They might call me as a witness."

"Well," said Billy, "you could lie, couldn't you? Oh no, I don't suppose you could," she added reflectively; "you wouldn't know how to."

The upshot of her conversation with Jim was that Billy shortly afterwards found herself interviewing, or rather, being interviewed by, Sir Richard Maitland, senior partner of the firm of solicitors famous for their skill in handling *causes celèbres*. Sir Richard might be described as the de Lesseps of divorce; certainly Billy's case could not have been placed in better hands, but she regarded him merely as a troublesome old gentleman with a *penchant* for asking ridiculous questions and an irritating habit of twiddling his watch-chain.

"Mr. Langton must be communicated with," he said, as he indicated that the consultation was over by touching a bell; "but not by you. I'll look after that. The less you see of him the better," he added significantly.

"Thanks," said Billy, "you seem to have a very poor opinion of me."

Sir Richard twiddled his watch-chain.

"I think you said that you are still staying at Queen's Gate?"

"Yes, my husband left it at my disposal."

"I think you would be wise to stay with your people."

"I shouldn't be wise long," she replied, "for they'd drive me out of my mind."

So she went back to Queen's Gate, where she found Langton waiting for her. He had followed her across the Channel by the next boat, and, on his return to the studio, had himself been served with the petition. He waved the offending document in his hand.

"Good-bye be blowed," he said; "we're both on in this act."

CHAPTER XXIII

"It is absolutely necessary that you and Mr. Langton should not see each other until after this case is over," said Sir Richard Maitland.

Billy's mouth curved mutinously.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because it's indiscreet, it will provoke comment at the trial."

"I should have thought they'd got enough to talk about as it is," she replied.

"Is that any reason why you should give them more?" he answered. "Perhaps you will appreciate that my advice is well founded when I tell you that Slazenger's men are watching you and Mr. Langton, and between you you're keeping their pencils and notebooks pretty busy."

"But I've done nothing wrong," she objected.

"Let us see," said Sir Richard. He commenced to tabulate her offences on his fingers. "You are living by yourself at Queen's Gate; Mr. Langton calls practically every day—which, by the way, he never did when your husband was there; he has lunch with you very often, sometimes tea, on one occasion you went to a theatre with him, and on another——"

"Stop! stop!" cried Billy, "one would think that you were the Recording Angel and these were sins."

"They're indiscretions," said Sir Richard, "and I warn you that they will be fatal ones unless they're stopped. What is more, I'm afraid that I cannot continue to look after your interests if you persist in disregarding my advice."

Billy took about a minute for reflection. She could occasionally see the obvious.

"All right," she said; "I've no doubt you're right. I won't see him any more—after to-day."

"To-day?" he queried.

"Mr. Langton is coming to lunch."

Sir Richard twiddled his watch-chain violently.

"Can't you put him off?" he asked.

"No," she said, "I must explain my taking the pledge."

Sir Richard laughed.

"Total abstinence is absolutely essential in these cases. Before yours is over you will understand why. But I suppose Access and Opportunity is a doctrine you've never heard of."

"No," said Billy, "and I don't want to. It doesn't sound a nice one."

Her conversation with Sir Richard took place some three months after the service of the petition upon herself and Langton. Great as had been the shock occasioned her by that event, she had been too fully occupied with the bustle and excitement of preparation for the trial, constant interviews with her solicitors, with sympathetic and indignant friends, and with Langton, to feel her position acutely or to brood over her wrongs. She and Langton were represented by different solicitors. Sir Richard insisted upon this; but, although they were thus kept apart from each

other so far as the actual conduct of the case was concerned, they lost no opportunity of being in each other's society. Her reunion with Langton had been the one consoling feature of the situation to Billy. She had, indeed, managed to extract a considerable measure of happiness out of it. It was therefore with very reluctant lips that she told him at lunch of Sir Richard's ultimatum. As she expected, he did not accept the situation meekly. He rose from his chair impatiently and strode about the room.

"What a set of rotters these beggars are," he said, "with their doctrine of Access and Opportunity! One would imagine that no lawyer had ever come across a decent-minded man or woman in his life. However, I suppose we've got to do what they tell us. After all, they're on the bridge, aren't they?"

"Anyhow," she said, "it isn't good-bye for ever this time."

"No," he replied, "we will never say that any more."

There was a peculiar emphasis in his last words that attracted Billy's attention.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

He seated himself beside her and took her hands in his.

"How could you and I ever say that *now*?" he said.

She turned to him.

"Do you really feel like that, Frank?" she murmured.

"Yes," he replied; "don't you?"

She got up from her seat and walked to the window; he followed her.

"It's only a half-finished picture," she said chokingly.

"Need it always be?" he asked.

He saw the look of reproach in her eyes and hastened to explain.

"I mean—this case—we might lose."

"And then?"

"I will marry you, darling."

She turned a startled face towards him.

"Frank," she said, "do you think there's a chance of our losing?"

"Well," he answered, "my man don't seem very sanguine; I don't know what your man thinks."

"Nor do I," she replied; "he's not the sort of man to tell anybody what he thinks."

She dirtied her fingers in an aimless attempt to draw figures on the window-pane.

"We mustn't lose; we *mustn't*. We've got to pull this game off, Frank, you and I. We're perfectly innocent, we mustn't lose—we can't lose."

He drew her to his arms, he was about to kiss her, but she repulsed him gently.

"No," she said, "we've played the game so far; let's keep it up."

He released her at once.

"Oh, Billy," he said, "if you knew how I loved you!"

She turned on him almost fiercely.

"What about me?" she cried; "what about my love? Do you think that *I* don't want to kiss *you?* There! that's over," she continued more gently, "let's be worthy of each other."

"I shall never be worthy of you," he replied.

"Now you're talking rot," she answered.

Her slangy retort cleared the air for the time being of the sentiment with which it was charged, and they relapsed into their customary attitude towards each other, and spent a thoroughly enjoyable afternoon together. But sentiment took the lead again when Langton rose to go.

Billy held out her hand to him, and he held out his arms to her.

"We shan't see each other again for months," he said.

And Billy capitulated.

"Don't let us write," she said; "let us remember this."

"Always and always," he replied.

"Sometimes," he continued, "I wish we might lose this wretched case."

"Well," she answered, "the worst may come to the worst."

"Then," he said, "Kismet! The best shall come to the best. You could bear it with me, dear, couldn't you?"

"I could bear anything with you, Frank," she replied. "Good-bye."

Then succeeded the weary process of waiting, waiting for her case to come on. Her solicitors no longer required her constant attendance at their office, her friends could not keep their sympathy and indignation perpetually at boiling-point to stimulate her, and she had lost Langton. She often wondered in the days that followed her last interview with him whether she would have been able to live up to her farewell to him at Dieppe. She thought she would have been.

Then she had braced herself for a great effort and she had succeeded. But to do it twice was quite another matter. Besides, things had been different then. She had loved him, but she had withdrawn herself from him as soon as their love had found each other out. Now, the screen was down, the veil was torn, and she had been fanning the flame instead of quenching it. It is true that she had "played the game." Once they had kissed at Dieppe—and once again at Queen's Gate. That was all. A trivial matter? No, not to the woman who loves. Billy had known that, and she had flown from Langton in her strength. But she had returned to him in her weakness.

She knew, however, that Sir Richard was right. Total abstinence until the case was over. And then? She didn't know. Her heart told her that she could never regard Langton as anything but a lover; her limited notions of right and wrong forbade her to treat him as anything but a friend. Supposing she lost the case? She couldn't lose it; she had done nothing really wrong. But supposing?—well, she had Frank—and Madge Fairborough had "found her way back."

Of course there was Jim? Jim was a dear, but he wasn't very helpful in the present crisis. He couldn't make up to Billy for the absence of Langton. He tried to and she enjoyed his society, but she soon discovered that in order to give her the benefit of it he was neglecting his practice. So she put her foot down on that.

"I shall go home to Ma," she said.

"It's the best thing to do," acquiesced Jim; "although you'll be a bit of a show at Beachaven, won't you?"

Billy laughed.

"I don't suppose Beachaven knows," she said. The *Daily Mail* hasn't honoured me with a paragraph yet, and that's the only paper they read; the local paper's not exactly a sleuth hound, and I don't suppose my own people have been chatty on the subject. Besides, I'm not an important person like a Gaiety girl, and Jerry's only half a peer."

So she went to Beachaven, which was much too busily engaged at the moment in discussing whether its foreshore was going to be washed away by the encroachment of the sea to bother about her affairs. There she set herself to endure the long spell of waiting which must ensue before her case could come on, and, by way of occupation, played the worst golf that she'd ever done in her life.

Langton occupied himself with golf also, and found that he was playing better than he had ever done before. But love affects men and women in different ways.

For about a fortnight after Billy's departure to Beachaven, Langton was acutely miserable. Acute misery with him took the form of late nights at the club, bad bridge and indifferent billiards. Then he rallied a bit. After all, why be miserable? Billy loved him; that was the great thing. And there wasn't going to be any more silly rot about saying good-bye for ever either. Of course there was that beastly case. They had been a pair of silly fools to let themselves in for a mess like that. Well, they had got to get out of it, that was all. They'd get out of it all right. He'd probably make a bit of an ass of himself in the witness-box, but that wouldn't last long,

and Billy was sure to be splendid; she'd pull him through. Suppose she didn't pull him through? Suppose they lost? Oh, then they would have to marry. They would have the satisfaction of knowing that they loved each other. Still, it oughtn't to come to that. It wasn't pleasant to be labelled "unclean."

He called on his solicitor.

"Retain the best man for me you can get," he said.

So Mr. Courtney Hope, K.C., was retained. Courtney Hope possessed one of the finest brogues that Ireland had recently exported, also a sanguine temperament. He took a very rosy view of Langton's case, especially when he learnt that no damages were claimed, possibly on that account.

"My dearr surr," he said to Langton, "you'rre arll right. Ron away and play."

Langton had insisted upon a preliminary conference as soon as his counsel had been retained. "I always like to see the jockey," he said.

Courtney Hope's cheering words were as balm of Gilead to Langton, for his solicitor had not been optimistic up to then, though he now became so. So he adopted the advice that had been given him, collected his favourite golf clubs, shut up his studio, and started on a golfing tour. He discovered to his delight that he was right on his game, perhaps due to the feeling that his case was in the hands of those who believed in it, perhaps to the relief of not having to bother about it himself any more, perhaps merely to the fact that he had not played for some time and therefore came to the game with renewed zest. The fact remains that he played so well on the various courses he visited that he began to take his game

intensely seriously, and finally decided to gratify his long-felt golfing ambition and enter for the amateur championship.

In these circumstances, the approaching trial—which approached so slowly—receded to the back of his mind, and even Billy faded from the forefront of his thoughts. Of course he constantly thought of her. He pictured how pleased she would be if she knew how well he was playing. He wanted to write and tell her about it, but she had asked him not to write. How silly of her. Surely she would have been glad to hear from him. Perhaps she was afraid that he would have written love letters to her. She needn't have been afraid. He would have found it quite easy not to write love letters. As a matter of fact, he would have found that class of correspondence rather difficult. Of course he *loved* her? Yes, he was awfully fond of her—*awfully*.

Langton didn't win the amateur championship, but he made a very good show in it, and was quite satisfied with himself. He half expected to get a note from Billy sympathizing with him when he was knocked out. She must have seen his name in the papers?

But Billy hadn't been reading the papers. She played golf perfunctorily, but she took no interest in it. She imagined that Langton was taking none either. That's where she was wrong. Their symptoms had been similar, but their complaint was different.

The Aynesworth divorce case was one of the first special jury cases for trial in the ensuing Michaelmas sittings, and, as the Long Vacation neared its close, little advance eddies of gossip and public interest

manifested themselves, a paragraph here and there, a photograph of Jerry which did him rigorous justice, one of Billy which did not, and a notice in a sporting periodical eulogistic of Langton's golf, which it would certainly have ignored had not his morals been called in question. Witnesses were gathered together by solicitors' clerks, who, metaphorically speaking, acted the part of sheep-dogs, barked at their heels and worried them generally. Lady Fairborough and Jim declined to be driven into the fold and sheared—in other words, they refused to make statements—so they were served with subpœnas; and Billy and Langton were called up to Town by their respective solicitors, who wanted to prepare their proofs.

Langton returned to London reluctant for the fray; he had had a half-hope in his mind that the matter might, after all, be allowed to drop. Billy, on the other hand, was glad that the day of battle was approaching. She was sick of the weary waiting; and then, whatever happened, once the trial was over, the embargo on Langton's companionship would be removed. She hungered for him. Even to see him, if it were only in court in the witness-box, would be something. Love had struck Billy late, but it had struck her deep.

Mr. and Mrs. Holroyd wanted to come up to London with Billy and stay with her at Queen's Gate; they considered that it was their duty to be with their daughter at this crisis in her life, but their daughter had different views.

"You're a pair of dears," she said; "but I couldn't bear it. It'll be bad enough as it is, but to have the *Daily Mirror* spreading its photographs over my relations as well as myself would be awful. Number

one, portrait of Respondent; number two, Respondent and her mother leaving the court; number three, Respondent's father, the well-known banker; number four, Respondent's mother faints; number five, spot where Respondent's mother fainted, marked with a cross; number six, John Jones, the boy scout who ran and fetched the sal volatile!"

Billy's sprightly tone was put on for the occasion, for she was feeling far from frivolous at the moment. She succeeded in her object, however, which was to exclude her near relations from the scene of action; with the exception of her brother Sydney, who was now living in London, and who she would feel quite glad to have as an escort to and from the court.

It was on the afternoon before the day fixed for the trial that Billy saw her leading counsel for the first time. Sir Richard had retained Mr. Murray Paget, K.C., M.P., for her, the young King's Counsel noted for his audacity and his wit both in the Law Courts and the House of Commons.

"He'll be Solicitor-General before he's forty," Sir Richard said to her, "and that's the kind of man your case requires," he added dryly.

"Well, he'll be a change to the other man, anyway," replied Billy. She referred to her junior counsel, a divorce court practitioner of portentous solemnity of manner and considerable knowledge of the court in which he passed his life—and nothing else.

Murray Paget was all the rage at the moment; indeed, his name figured in so many cases that it was perfectly clear that he himself could only figure for a brief time in many of them. His chambers were in King's Bench Walk, Temple, and thither Billy and Sir

Richard proceeded at about half-past four on the afternoon before the trial. A very smart clerk received them; he was young like his master, and had risen with him. He ushered them into a poky little room at the back, and left them to their own devices whilst he went to inform Mr. Murray Paget of their arrival. It was apparently a very old room in which they waited, and everything in it was very old also; old briefs, old newspapers, an old wig box, an old paste pot, an old pair of scissors, and the lid of a departed coal scuttle diffidently obtruded themselves upon one's attention. Sir Richard sat sedately upon a very old chair, twiddling his watch-chain and keeping a furtive eye on his nicely ironed hat, which the clerk had hung on a very old and uncertainly attached peg in the wall.

Presently the clerk returned and said that Mr. Murray Paget would like to see Sir Richard. Sir Richard rose, cast a lingering, anxious look at his hat, and Billy was left alone. Not for long, for the clerk soon joined her. He offered her a newspaper with a little flourish—he prided himself on his breeding; he was also impressionable.

"Would you like to glance at the paper, madam?" he said, with intensely correct pronunciation.

"No, thanks," she replied.

"Rubber is going up, I'm told," he continued.

"Yes?" she answered. She was wondering what Mr. Murray Paget and Sir Richard were talking about.

"Perhaps you aren't interested in the Stock Exchange?" pursued the clerk.

She thought she heard a door open.

"I think Mr. Murray Paget is free now," she said.

"No," replied the clerk, "that's only one of our young gentlemen. We have a lot in Chambers. I call that room the bear garden," he added with a deprecatory little laugh, "only we feed the bears on papers instead of buns."

"Really," said Billy uninterestedly. Apparently she was expected to say something.

"Yes, they learn their work by reading the briefs. Very interesting some of them are, too."

A quiver ran down Billy's spine.

"Do they read all the papers?"

"Oh yes."

"And you too?"

"Well, rather." He nearly added, "What do you think?" but concluded on reflection that it would not be a sufficiently gentlemanly remark. He was quite the latest thing in clerks.

"Do you mind opening the window?" said Billy. "It's hot."

The clerk obeyed. He was somewhat surprised. It was not at all hot. Billy was, however, with shame. The idea of her troubles being one of the topics of conversation in the "bear garden" and the domestic circle of the barrister's clerk did not appeal to her.

Presently a bell sounded.

"Mr. Murray Paget is disengaged now," said the clerk, "please come this way."

She was ushered into a large room, apparently nicely furnished, but too dimly lighted to enable her to perceive clearly whether it was or not. Her solicitor and junior counsel were mere shadowy forms round the table, which occupied the centre of the room, and the

only clearly defined figure was that of the man who sat under the two electric lights with crimson shades which hung suspended from the ceiling. He rose to his feet as she entered and shook hands with her, then motioned her to an armchair drawn up by the table within the circle of light within which he himself sat.

She regarded him with interest; he was very young, very good looking, clean shaven, sharp featured, long fingered, keen eyed. He didn't give her time for further analysis, for he plunged forthwith into business. He handed her a typewritten document. It was a copy of the letter she had written to Langton asking him not to come to dinner.

"I've been talking to Sir Richard about this," he said; "we've only just learnt of it in the other side's latest affidavit of documents. We ought to have known of it before. However, that doesn't matter; what's it mean?"

"What it says."

"It says that you're afraid to have Mr. Langton to dinner at your house."

"It doesn't!" exclaimed Billy indignantly.

"Pardon me, it does. *You* may not, but *it* does."

"I wasn't a bit afraid; I didn't want him, that was all."

"Why didn't you want him?"

"Oh, I don't know—does it matter?"

"Very much. Why?"

"Well, I knew my husband didn't like Mr. Langton—and I thought he might show it."

"But your husband wanted him to come."

"Yes, because he was jealous."

"Why was he jealous?"

"Oh, because, because he—oh, I suppose he thought he was in love with me—that makes men jealous."

"Was he in love with you?"

Billy wriggled impatiently.

"I dare say," she said.

"Were you in love with him?"

"What do you want to know that for?"

"Never mind. Were you?"

"Not particularly."

"At all?"

"No, not at all. Why, you're doing the cross-examination, or whatever you call it, yourself."

"When did you cease being in love with him?"

"I never was, and he never ought to have been?"

"Please explain."

Billy threw aside her fur. She wished this man would leave off asking questions.

"We agreed we wouldn't be, and he broke his agreement," she said.

Murray Paget paused in his string of questions for a moment. Then he suddenly looked her straight in the eyes.

"When did you fall in love with Mr. Langton?" he asked.

Billy rose from her seat.

"I—nev——"

The revelations in Switzerland and at Dieppe flashed through her brain—no, she couldn't betray

her love like that. She recovered herself with an effort, but the perspiration stood out on her brow.

"Can—they—ask—me—that?" she jerked.

"They can ask it. I wanted to see if you could answer it."

She resumed her seat.

"Of course I can answer it," she said coldly. "I never fell in love with Mr. Langton, nor he with me!"

She felt as if she were stoning a child.

Then Murray Paget proceeded to take her in detail through the multifarious charges in the petition. He apparently made no notes, but just sat still and asked her questions. Why did she do this? Why did she do that? Would she please explain her conduct on such and such an occasion and so on. So she explained. She was perpetually explaining, and it seemed to her that her explanations sounded more and more childish as she went on. Murray Paget gave no sign of what he thought of them; she wished he would. After about an hour of this sort of thing, the conversational clerk appeared with something written on a slip of paper.

"All right," said Murray Paget, "when I ring." He ceased questioning, and his fingers sought a bundle of papers. He had clearly become indifferent to Billy's case, and was thinking of some one else's. Sir Richard rose vaguely from the shadow.

"Thank you, Mr. Murray Paget," he said, "for giving us so much of your time."

"Not at all," replied Murray Paget, and rang his bell.

Then Billy turned to her counsel.

"Mr. Murray Paget," she said, "you've asked me a great many questions. Now I want to ask you one. Am I going to win?"

Murray Paget stretched out his hand and slightly tilted one of the crimson shaded lamps. He cast an approving glance at Billy.

"Wear that hat," he said.

CHAPTER XXIV

"AYNESWORTH against Aynesworth and Langton," said the registrar, and Billy's case began. The Court had just re-assembled after the luncheon adjournment. The morning had been occupied in finishing a case part-heard the previous day. The long period of waiting was over. Billy was glad of it. She settled herself in her seat to listen to the opening of Sir Mathew Hake, Jerry's leading counsel.

Sir Mathew Hake was a tall, big man, with a commanding presence and a resonant voice. He had been a Solicitor-General in his time, and, when his party came in, would probably be so again. His success at the Bar and in politics was probably due more to his personality than to his intellect. He conveyed the impression of the burly, honest Englishman, the family man; he was, in fact, just the very sort of man who appeals to the English elector, and an admirable advocate to select for representing the wrongs of an injured husband to an English jury.

"This is the story of an extraordinary marriage," he began in his rolling voice, "a marriage at the commencement of which neither man nor woman loved nor professed to love at all, but a marriage in the course of which the man came to love the woman and the woman came to love somebody else."

So Jerry had told everything. Billy had wondered whether he would. She supposed he had had the whole wretched story dragged out of him by his solicitor, his counsel, and Blanche—especially Blanche. She stole a glance at her husband, but she couldn't see him properly; she and Jerry and Langton were all sitting in the well of the court, but they were effectually fenced off from each other by their respective solicitors. She resumed her listening to the voice behind her.

"Miss Holroyd was pretty and captivating, Mrs. Aynesworth was not less so. Unfortunately, Mrs. Aynesworth did not utilize her charms to reciprocate the love which had now been born in her husband, but to fascinate somebody else. She neglected her wifely duties, she declined to join in her husband's pursuits, and when he endeavoured to join in hers she deceived him."

Billy began to feel quite uncomfortable. She wasn't accustomed to being talked at in this extremely personal way. She felt herself grow red with embarrassment, and then she remembered that all the general public could see of her was the top of her hat. That afforded her a great feeling of relief. She began to take quite a detached interest in the story which Sir Mathew Hake was unfolding. The fact that he was invisible to her, and that she was practically invisible to him, imparted to it a curiously impersonal effect. Of course, she would change all that if she turned round. But there was no occasion for her to turn round.

"The golf course was the common ground on which they met—this young man and this young woman—once a week, twice a week, three times a

week, and finally every day they played golf together. And all this time the husband never even knew of the existence of Mr. Frank Langton—she took very good care of that."

Billy felt that the owner of the voice was pointing at her. She was very grateful to her hat, which was a large one. She wondered if that was why Murray Paget had made her wear it. She did turn round sufficiently to see how he took this denunciation of his client, but he wasn't in his place.

"Where's Mr. Murray Paget?" she whispered to Sir Richard at her side.

"Oh, I don't suppose he'll be back to-day," replied the latter calmly; "he's engaged in another court."

Billy gasped with astonishment and indignation. *Her* counsel engaged in another court whilst her case was being tried! She wanted to get up and stop the case. Sir Richard attempted to soothe her.

"It's all right," he said, "he'll be here to-morrow, and he won't be wanted before—Sir Mathew will be speaking all the afternoon."

Billy snorted her dissatisfaction, but she did not attempt to stop the trial—which was just as well, as the judge might have had something to say on the subject.

"Their romance began on the golf links, and it culminated in the studio, for, as I think I have told you, gentlemen, Mr. Langton was an artist. He seems to have been a very slow and painstaking artist. And that brings me to the story of the Unfinished Picture. Mr. Langton undertook to paint the portrait of this young lady. She came to his studio practically every

day for weeks, I may say for months, and stayed there for hours at a time. Prolonged sittings, very! Sittings which necessitated relaxation in the shape of confidential conversation, rest in easy and conveniently adjacent chairs—and tea! Sittings which rendered it desirable to send the only witness to the proceedings out on long and purely fictitious errands! *but* sittings which utterly failed to produce anything in the nature of a portrait of the young wife whom the co-respondent called 'Billy'! He might have plastered the walls of his studio with portraits in the time which he spent in *not* painting this one! He could have filled this court with the products of the art he loved! Perhaps he will give us the benefit of seeing that of the model he loved! I do not know, but I have given him notice to produce it."

Sir Mathew was warming to his work. He had now got well into his stride. Billy couldn't help admiring the skill with which he put the case against her, pieced together various seemingly unimportant incidents, and from them drew deadly conclusions. Had he forgotten the letter? He hadn't mentioned it yet, and was now dealing with events in the studio long subsequent to it. No, he had not forgotten it. Sir Mathew knew when to play a trump card most effectively.

"You may think, gentlemen," said the voice, "that Mrs. Peters was officious, over curious. Well, she was curious, but not curious without a cause. Some time before, before ever she set eyes on Mrs. Aynesworth, she picked up something while she was cleaning out the studio. At first she thought it was a piece of waste paper. But it wasn't. It was a letter. Here it is:—

"'DEAR FRANK,

"'Jerry wants me to ask you to dinner next Thursday. I don't want you to come, so please say you're engaged. I'll explain when we meet.

"'Yours,

"'BILLY.'

"That letter made Mrs. Peters curious. Well, gentlemen, it makes me curious; it may possibly have the same effect on you. Was that the letter of an honest woman or a guilty one?"

And so on, and so on, the voice proceeded, rising and falling in indignant declamation or restrained mockery, occasionally purely conversational, occasionally becoming rhetorical, never theatrical, but persistently dramatic. Billy glanced at the clock. It was five minutes to four. The voice had been speaking for nearly two hours, it seemed to have narrated everything that she had done in her life, together with a number of things which she was incapable of doing. Surely it had nearly finished. Yes, Sir Mathew was concluding.

"Gentlemen, you may sympathize with the young woman who has married too soon and loved too late, you may condemn the man who has married a woman knowing that there was no love in his own heart nor in hers, you cannot but despise the man who caused the woman to disgrace the honourable name she bore, but you will not only be passing an accurate judgment upon the facts of this case, but also truly furthering the future welfare of the petitioner, by dissolving his ill-considered marriage and obliterating this lamentable episode from his life."

The voice ceased. Sir Mathew had sat down. The judge rose.

"Half-past ten to-morrow, gentlemen," said somebody, and then everybody seemed to be moving at once, and papers, umbrellas, hats, and bags became inextricably confused. Billy's ears were burning. She hadn't been able to remain impersonal throughout Sir Mathew's speech. Many of his remarks had been somewhat direct, and some of them stung. Moreover, it is not gratifying to a pretty young woman to be described as "a lamentable episode."

She followed the stream of people through the doors of the court. Langton was in the corridor. He smiled when he saw her.

"I've got to avoid you like the plague," he said, "I'm told that they're still watching us."

"What a nuisance!" she replied; "I wanted you to come to tea."

"Never mind, old girl," he answered. "It's only for two or three days, and then——"

"And then?" she queried.

"I'll finish your picture and present it to Jerry as some compensation for losing his case."

Her face brightened. Frank was at any rate not down in the mouth, why should she be? She saw Jim and tried to speak to him, but he waved her aside with mock solemnity.

"No," he said; "I'm taboo. I'm a witness."

So she went home with her brother Sydney.

The Aynesworth case had evidently caught on. "The Extraordinary Marriage Case" flashed on Billy's eyes from the posters of the evening papers, as she and Sydney drove home in their taxi. Sir Mathew's

opening had effectively apprised the Press that the case was worth booming into a *cause célèbre*.

"All the better for you," said Sydney, "when you win."

"Yes," she replied with a slight alteration of emphasis, "when you do."

She was late getting into court the next morning. As a matter of fact, she had considerable trouble to get into it at all, especially when the people who seemed to fill every available foot of space discovered who she was. They all wanted to look at her, and, as she towered above most of them, they had little difficulty in doing so. For once in her life she envied Jerry his height, or rather, his absence of it. "It's objectionable to be stared at in large quantities," she said to Sydney as she took her seat.

Jerry was in the witness-box and Sir Mathew Hake was examining him. Jerry didn't appear at all comfortable. He looked much more like a prisoner than a petitioner. Billy was certain that he would have run away if he could, and she felt quite sorry for him. She didn't bear him any malice for the present proceedings; her somewhat stormy telephonic conversation with Blanche had enlightened her considerably as to who was really responsible for them. She cast a friendly glance in his direction, but he avoided her gaze. He wouldn't have instituted the proceedings, but he had no doubt of her guilt. It had been an awful shock to him. All his petty feelings of petulance for past slights had become merged in acute distress. That Billy should have done this thing! She was dead.

Jerry's examination in chief lasted about an hour and a half. The whole story of his unsuccessful

married life was told by him, or rather extracted from him by Sir Mathew Hake. No, not quite the whole—the non-conjugal relations between him and Billy were not revealed. Billy was glad of that—there is a limit to frankness. At length Sir Mathew desisted from his task, like a forensic bee which had extracted the last drop of honey from a flower—poor Jerry was a somewhat decadent one. Murray Paget rose to cross-examine and the Court settled itself to enjoy the process.

"You didn't love your wife when you married her?" queried the young King's counsel.

"No," said Jerry.

"When did you get to love her?"

Jerry played nervously with the edge of the witness-box.

"I don't quite know," he said; "soon afterwards."

"A year?"

"About that?"

"Very much?"

"I suppose so."

"Don't you know?"

Jerry hesitated.

"Don't you know?" repeated Murray Paget.

"Yes," said Jerry defiantly, "very much."

"How long did your adoration of your wife continue?"

"The witness didn't say that he adored her," objected Sir Mathew Hake.

"Then I will ask him," replied Murray Paget imperturbably.

"When you loved your wife very much, may I take it that you adored her?"

"Ye—es," stammered the wretched Jerry.

Billy began to consider her counsel an awful bounder.

"And how long did your adoration last?"

"I—I don't know exactly."

"About how long?"

"I really can't tell you."

"Perhaps until you met Mrs. D'Arcy?"

Sir Mathew Hake arose in his wrath.

"There is no allegation against Mrs. D'Arcy in the pleadings," he said.

"Nor now," replied Murray Paget; "so my learned friend needn't get excited."

A tall young man wearing a very new wig rose from the back of the court.

"I am instructed to watch this case on behalf of Mrs. D'Arcy," he said nervously.

"Then do so," remarked the judge testily, "and don't interrupt. I suppose you will arrive at something that is relevant to this issue in time," he added to Murray Paget.

"I'm sanguine of doing so, m'Lord, if I'm not interrupted," replied the latter with calm impertinence, and proceeded to harry Jerry.

"Did you ever ask your wife for an explanation of her conduct?" he asked in the course of the cross-examination.

"No," replied Jerry.

"Why not?"

"I was advised not to."

"By whom?"

"My sister."

"Your sister!" echoed Murray Paget, and the Court

laughed. "Is she the managing director of your matrimonial affairs?"

Jerry blushed and wriggled, but remained silent.

"Was it your sister who put the detectives on Mrs. Aynesworth's track?" pursued his tormenter.

"No," replied Jerry, "it wasn't."

"Who then? Mrs. D'Arcy?"

It was a shot in the dark, but it came off.

"Yes," said Jerry, and without thinking of what he was saying, added to vindicate Mrs. D'Arcy's action, "she was anxious about my wife, and wanted to give her a welcome home."

"Oh, did she?" commented Murray Paget with a sarcasm that burnt.

Thus, for the rest of the morning Murray Paget continued with the, to him, congenial task of making poor Jerry appear ridiculous. His object was to expose all the weakness and vanity of the little man, to turn him, metaphorically speaking, inside out, to cast ridicule upon the case that he had to meet by smothering with ridicule the man who had brought it. It was an easy task. Jerry was finally reduced to the condition of an electrified cork ball.

Billy felt a great wave of pity pass through her for poor, badgered Jerry. She had never felt like that for him before. She had often enough made him appear ridiculous herself, but it was quite another thing when somebody else was doing it for her. Moreover, this was such a cold-blooded proceeding. She would have liked to go up to Jerry, tell him it was all a mistake, and ask him to come away with her out of the court. She was sure he would have done so. It was too late for that, however. She turned to Sir Richard.

"This is brutal," she said; "I can't stand it."

She half rose to go.

"Better stay where you are," he answered, "it won't last long now."

Sir Richard was right, for Jerry had reached the limit of his endurance. His feeble little being could not withstand this public dissecting process any longer.

Suddenly he collapsed. Instead of answering Murray Paget's latest taunt, he leant forward on the witness-box and buried his face in his hands, whilst his shoulders quivered convulsively.

"I didn't want to come here," he sobbed, "I didn't want to come here."

Murray Paget sat down with the satisfied air of a surgeon who has performed a highly successful operation.

Jerry's outburst was only momentary, and he was not quite at the end of his troubles yet. There was a strained feeling in the court when he recovered himself; possibly the audience which had derived so much amusement from Jerry's performance under the hands of Murray Paget were feeling slightly ashamed of themselves. Murray Paget wasn't—that was not his way.

Courtney Hope got up to cross-examine on behalf of Langton. His rich, Irish brogue was a welcome relief to the quiet, incisive English of Murray Paget. He waited until Jerry was ready to face the music once more.

"D'ye suggest, Mr. Aynesworth, that ye're the only young mahn who is capable of an innocent attachment f'r a young woman?" he asked.

"I—I don't understand," stammered Jerry.

"Mrs. D'Arcy," explained the Irishman.

"My relations with her were quite innocent," said Jerry.

"Quite so, quite so, and phwhy shouldn't the relations of Mr. Langton with y'r wife be equally so?"

"My wife left her home," answered Jerry.

"Becahse ye made it impossible for her. Didn't ye now?"

"I—I don't think so."

"Did ut never occurr to ye that ye were making her an object of contempt and ridicule to h'r friends and h'r servants?"

"No," said Jerry, "it didn't."

"Didn't she complain about it?"

"Yes," admitted Jerry, "she did."

"And did ye attempt to effect a cure?"

Jerry lost his temper.

"No," he said, "her complaint was incurable."

"Ye mean," retorted the K.C., "she asked for the society of h'r husband, and there was no supply of the article."

And so on for about ten minutes, after which the Court rose for lunch.

Mrs. Peters went into the witness-box after lunch. She was examined by Jerry's junior counsel. She fully realized the importance of the position she occupied in the case. She was, however, very suspicious of anything in a wig and gown, and for a considerable time regarded the counsel who was examining her as her avowed enemy.

"Your name is Mrs. Peters, I believe?" he began.

"Yes," said Mrs. Peters reluctantly, as if she were not quite sure about it.

"You used to attend upon Mr. Langton at the Camden Studios?"

"I used to clean 'is studio out," she admitted cautiously. "It took some cleanin' too," she added confidentially to the judge.

"You are not at the studio now, I believe?" pursued counsel.

"No," said Mrs. Peters, with the conscious air of scoring one against the man in the wig, "I'm 'ere."

Presently she thawed sufficiently to explain that she had left the studios "to better 'erself," after which she became communicative, and proceeded to pour forth her evidence in a volume of words, which neither counsel nor judge was able to stem. She had "happened" to see this and to hear that. She had apparently always "happened to be about" whenever Billy and Langton were together in the studio. She had "chanced" to see them kissing, she had been "'orror struck" to hear the things they had said to each other; not that she had ever listened, far from it. It "just happened that she was by."

Billy listened to Mrs. Peters' imaginative discursiveness with growing astonishment and indignation.

"The old liar," she whispered to Sydney.

"Yes," he replied, "Ananias lived before his time; she would just have done for him."

At length Mrs. Peters' examination-in-chief was concluded. She was about to leave the box, but the usher directed her attention to Murray Paget, who had risen to cross-examine.

"What! Another of you!" she exclaimed.

"You seem to have taken rather a prejudice against Mrs. Aynesworth?" he said.

"Yes," replied Mrs. Peters, "you'd take a prejudice against a young woman if you first of all saw her in a young man's bedroom."

"But she was only looking at his pictures?"

"H'm," sniffed Mrs. Peters; "not 'arf, I don't think!"

"Your remark is a trifle obscure," said Murray Paget politely.

"So's them pictures," replied Mrs. Peters with emphasis.

Murray Paget proceeded to deal with another incident which Mrs. Peters had adorned with her imagination. It was the occasion when Billy and Langton had been practising approach shots over a chair, and Mrs. Peters had, as usual, "happened to come into the room."

"They was just playin' 'ide and seek round the sofa, and *she* wasn't 'ard to find neither," said Mrs. Peters.

"I suggest they were merely engaged in picking up golf balls," said Billy's counsel.

"They'd picked up all the golf balls they wanted by the time I come in," replied Mrs. Peters significantly.

He referred to her statement that she had "chanced to see" Billy and Langton "kissin' and cuddlin' on the sofa."

"Surely," said Murray Paget, with an air of sweet reasonableness, "Mr. Langton was choking, and Mrs. Aynesworth was patting him on the back."

"She wosn't pattin' 'im on the back and 'e wosn't 'ittin' 'er over the 'ead with an 'achet neither," replied Mrs. Peters with deadly sarcasm. "They wos jest kissin' and cuddlin'. Think I don't know!"

Murray Paget got rather the worst of it from Mrs. Peters. He gave her up after a time.

"You're too clever for me!" he said, as he resumed his seat.

"I could 'ave told you that before you began," retorted Mrs. Peters.

Mrs. Peters was not, however, destined to have it all her own way. She turned to face a new foe. It was Courtney Hope, bland and smiling.

"And wot do you want?" she asked truculently.

"Tell me," he said, "did ye now ever have an innocent attachment f'r a young man?"

"Not me!" she replied promptly, and her answer was greeted with a roar of appreciative laughter.

Jim was the next witness. Yes, he was a barrister. He had been to Dieppe at Whitsuntide. He had seen Mrs. Aynesworth there. Also Mr. Langton. Had he left them there? They had left before he did? Where for? He couldn't say. Why? That was not his business. Did he inquire?

Jim looked appealingly at Murray Paget.

"Is that evidence?" objected the latter.

"I can't say that it isn't," said the judge. "Answer the question," he added to Jim.

Yes, he did inquire. Successfully? No. What did he do then? He went home. He was a great friend of Mrs. Aynesworth? He was a friend of hers. Cross-examined: There had been nothing improper in the behaviour of Mrs. Aynesworth towards Mr. Langton

whilst he had been at Dieppe. He would have noticed it if there had been. He had every opportunity of judging.

Then Lady Fairborough was called.

Poor little woman! She dreaded the ordeal of the witness-box. She had been there before, not so very long ago, and in that very same court, and before that very same judge. She could see that he remembered her by the glance he gave her as she was sworn. She wouldn't give Billy away though, she was resolved on that. Dear Billy! She had been very good to her.

Sir Mathew Hake examined Lady Fairborough himself. Yes, Mrs. Aynesworth had gone with her to Dieppe. No, she had not returned with her. Why not? Mrs. Aynesworth had liked the place and wanted to stay on. She was quite a free agent. Did she try to prevent Mrs. Aynesworth staying? She may have said that she was sorry they weren't going back together. That was all? Oh yes. Yes, Mr. Langton was at Dieppe. He sat at her table? Yes. When did he arrive? She couldn't remember, some time before she left. A short time before? A day or two? Yes, perhaps, she couldn't remember. She didn't attach any importance to it. Yes, she had called on Mrs. Aynesworth later in Queen's Gate. She thought she might have come back. No, she wasn't a bit anxious about her. Why should she be?

Murray Paget rose to cross-examine.

"Did you ever see anything improper in the behaviour of Mrs. Aynesworth or Mr. Langton to each other?" he asked.

"Never!" she replied emphatically. "And there

never was anything either," she added, only too willing to speak up for her friend, " I'm sure of that."

" Your opinion in these matters is not material," commented the judge with cruel significance. " We will rise now," he added, and the Court adjourned for the day.

CHAPTER XXV

THE general impression conveyed by the second day of the trial was that Billy had rather scored; for Jerry had made a very poor show in the witness-box, and Mrs. Peters had overdone her part. But, of course, up to the present the evidence had only touched the fringe of the case. The substance of the charges against Billy and Langton was left for the third day, when their continental wanderings would be dealt with.

The court was packed as on the previous day. There was no slackening of the public interest in the trial; if anything, it had increased. Quite a crowd of people assembled outside the Law Courts to catch even a momentary glimpse of any one connected, however remotely, with the case, to express their opinions upon it to each other, and to identify as Mrs. Aynesworth, Mrs. Peters, Langton, and Jerry totally inoffensive and respectable citizens who had never been inside the Divorce Court in their lives and never would be.

But in spite of the excitement amongst the spectators attending the re-opening of the case, it was a disappointing day. They had been looking forward to a further display of legal fireworks, but Murray Paget's cross-examination fell very flat, and even the buoyant Irishman, Courtney Hope, was disappointing. The evidence, too, was deadly monotonous. Clerks and servants from all the continental hotels Billy and

Langton had visited filed into the box, and related when "the young lady and her brother" had arrived, how long they had stayed, and what they did. But it was the same story from all of them, and a thoroughly respectable one too—or rather, it would have been had the chief actors in it been a brother and sister.

Not a gleam of humour enlivened the case throughout the day, and the morning of the fourth day of the trial was equally dull. Dull, yes, and depressing—to Billy. She began to realize the strength of the case against her as the continual stream of witnesses flowed through the witness-box. None of them with much to say, but all of them with something, something damaging, something true, something that couldn't be sneered away by Murray Paget, or laughed aside by Courtney Hope; something that she would have to explain when her turn came to go into the witness-box. How many more witnesses were there? They seemed innumerable. They appeared to spring out of the ground like the armed men who resulted from the dragon's teeth sown by Jason. He had been able to overcome them, it is true, but she didn't feel up to it. She had a headache. The court was stifling.

"Mr. Harris" went into the witness-box after the luncheon adjournment. He was Sir Mathew Hake's last witness. Sir Mathew had kept him to the last. It doesn't do to wind up an interesting case in an atmosphere of dullness, and the detective could hardly fail to be stimulating. Billy was surprised to see the change in her little cockney friend. Had it not been for his voice and his absence of aspirates, she thought she wouldn't have recognized him. His sporting tourist's attire had vanished, and was replaced by a

quiet serge suit; he was clean shaven too, whereas in Switzerland he had sported a moustache, and his hair looked neat and tidy. Altogether, he presented a reliable and respectable appearance—a desideratum when you are imparting information and not seeking it.

"Mr. Harris"—whose name, by the by, turned out to be Fletcher—related his experiences in matter-of-fact tones, carefully keeping time with his Lordship's pen, as one who was accustomed to give evidence in a court of law, and occasionally refreshing his memory from notes, which he explained in advance of possible objection "were made at the time." He was a thoroughly professional witness and, Billy admitted, a comparatively truthful one. That is to say, he didn't invent facts, but he had a facile knack of colouring them. The former hotel witnesses had, for instance, narrated how they had considered that Billy and Langton were merely a brother and sister on their travels, but the detective made it quite plain that their attitude towards each other had been unusually affectionate for that relationship. He didn't lie exactly, but he certainly coloured; he, in fact, filled in just what the other witnesses had left out. That, of course, was why he was called.

As Billy listened to the smooth-faced, imperturbable detective giving his evidence, a sense of hopelessness began to invade her. It had just needed the extra bit of weight and colour which "Mr. Harris" provided to display the case against her in its full strength. Hitherto, whilst depressed and wearied at the monotonous reiteration of her doings, the evidence *en masse* had somewhat resembled a jig-saw puzzle to her mind, but "Mr. Harris" was the last block which fitted neatly

into its place, and thereby transformed meaningless lines into a coherent picture. It was not a pleasant picture either. But a horribly definite one. Billy felt that it had got to be changed, that the blocks must be re-arranged and re-sorted, and a new tableau evolved. When? When she went into the box. How? Oh, that was Murray Paget's business. Was it? She knew it wasn't. She knew it was her business, that it was upon the show she made in the witness-box that the issue depended, that she had to satisfy those twelve commonplace men in the jury box that she was an eccentric, innocent young woman, and not a commonplace, guilty one. She glanced at them. Commonplace they were to a man, commonplace must obviously be their views of life, and their verdict would certainly be as commonplace as themselves. Billy felt that they were not the sort of jury she wanted at all. Her story required a jury box with a little imagination in it.

The jury followed "Mr. Harris's" evidence with the sleepy appreciation incidental to three o'clock in the afternoon in a hot and crowded court. The detective concluded his list of Billy's delinquencies abroad, but Sir Mathew Hake did not sit down. Instead, he assumed his blandest expression.

"Did you," he asked, "continue to watch the respondent and the co-respondent in London?"

Instantly Murray Paget was on his feet to object.

"That was subsequent to the service of the petition," he said with assumed or real indignation, "and can't possibly be evidence."

Sir Mathew gently waved a deprecating hand as if soothing a querulous child.

"My friend's case," he said, "is that these young people acted as they did from sheer thoughtlessness. It is significant that they continued being thoughtless after they had been brought to a sense of their position by being served with the petition."

"If Mrs. Aynesworth's behaviour was innocent before, why shouldn't it be innocent afterwards?" queried the judge.

"If a man trespasses on another man's land and says that he did it in ignorance, it is strong evidence of the nature of his first visit if, when he is no longer ignorant, he is found doing the same thing," replied Sir Mathew.

"It isn't evidence that he stole anything," interposed Murray Paget.

"That depends on whether it is an orchard or not," retorted Sir Mathew.

"I suppose you are referring to the case of Adam against Eve and another," said the judge, and the Court dutifully laughed. "However," he continued, "I think you might leave it, Sir Mathew. Surely you've got enough as it is."

Murray Paget again rose angrily.

"Really, my Lord," he said, "I protest."

The judge gazed mildly at the indignant advocate.

"I understood your objection to be that you had had enough too," he said.

"It's not so much your Lordship's remark as the suggestion it contains that I complain of," fumed Murray Paget.

"The suggestion, Mr. Murray Paget, emanates entirely from you," replied the judge dryly, at which remark one of the jurymen laughed appreciatively,

and Billy felt that her counsel hadn't done her much good by his interruption.

Murray Paget proceeded to work off his discomfiture on "Mr. Harris." So his real name was Fletcher, was it? How long had it been Fletcher? Oh, some time. And before that? Well, his real name was Ferguson? When was his name Ferguson? Oh, before he was a detective. What had he been before he was a detective? Need he answer that question? Certainly he must answer the question. Well, he had been a bookmaker. Why did he leave off being a bookmaker? Well, he got fined. More than once? Yes, two or three times, as a matter of fact. Had he been told that if he was caught again he would be sent to prison? Possibly, magistrates did say that sort of thing sometimes. Had he given evidence in divorce cases before? Heaps of times. Successfully? He didn't know what was meant by "successfully"; he had told the truth then, as he was doing now.

By the judge: There was nothing the matter so far as he knew with his eyesight, his hearing, or his memory.

"That being so," said the judge, "your morals appear to be immaterial."

"I was cross-examining to credit, my Lord," said Murray Paget.

"Not your own," replied the judge tartly.

"That is the case, my Lord," said Sir Mathew Hake.

The judge gave a curt little nod of acknowledgment, and the Court adjourned.

The crowded court proceeded to empty itself with the customary scraping of impatient feet. Billy didn't join the hurrying throng. She, indeed, seemed unconscious of it, as is the pebble by and over which the

water swirls. She had a horrible headache, no ordinary, dull, aching affair, such as comes from a stuffy atmosphere, but a thing of throbbing stabs. She had become deadly pale, and Sir Richard Maitland watched her rather anxiously.

"This won't do," he said; "you've got to look your best to-morrow, and you're thoroughly done up. Go home and have a real long night of it, and you needn't get here too early to-morrow morning. Twelve o'clock will be quite soon enough. Murray Paget will be speaking till then."

Billy nodded appreciation of her solicitor's forethought, and rose to her feet to go. She half stumbled out of court and into the waiting taxi which Sydney had summoned.

Somebody snapshotted her as she went down the steps into Carey Street. She had hitherto endeavoured to avoid these little attentions by concealing her face with her muff, but to-day she didn't care, her head occupied all her thoughts, it throbbed unendurably. Tea did her some good, and a stiff dose of phenacetin did her more, after which she went upstairs to her room to lie down and rest. But rest she could not. Pain had banished thought, and with the departure of pain thought returned. Thought as to to-morrow, thought as to what she was going to say when she went into the witness-box, thought as to what would be said to her, thought as to how her explanations would be treated. She writhed on the bed in mental anguish.

She sat up and pulled herself together with an effort. She was a fool; she was worse, she was a coward to go on like this, she was crying before she was whipped, she ought to be ashamed of herself, she deserved to

lose her case instead of to win it. Was she going to win it? Yes, she was, she was. She repeated this comforting assurance to herself as she dressed for dinner, but it failed to carry conviction to her brain. She had more or less composed herself by the time she met her brother at dinner, but that young gentleman revived all her disturbing thoughts by showing her the evening paper containing a full account of the trial. Billy couldn't help reading it, and the evidence seemed horribly convincing in cold print, but it was the headlines that affected her most: "Startling Detective Evidence"—"Judge's Comments"—"Close of Petitioner's case"—"Respondent in the Box To-morrow." She couldn't keep her eyes off the leaded type, and when she did finally manage to remove them, the letters stared up at her from the tablecloth, or from anything else she chanced to be looking at. She left her dinner practically untasted, and as soon as it was over she bade her brother good night and went up to her room. Sydney endeavoured to be sympathetic, but his sympathy was rather like that of the trainer of a horse which has gone lame on the eve of the race. He, indeed, regarded himself as Billy's trainer and approved of her early retirement.

"Go right off to bed," he said, "and go to sleep when you get there, because you've got to do big things to-morrow, you know."

Her brother's utter failure to appreciate the position brought a bitter little smile to Billy's lips as she went upstairs. He was disappointed in her because she was not, in his own language, "up to the mark;" well, a good night's sleep would cure all that, according to him. Doubtless it would—if she could get it.

It was rather a cold night, and some kindly soul had just lit a fire in Billy's room. It was a badly laid fire, and it smoked sulkily up the chimney in the way badly laid fires do. The wreathing smoke seemed curiously in attune with her thoughts—sombre, sinister, hopeless. It seemed to Billy that all her hopes and all her courage were enveloped by those curling columns of soot, and were being smothered by them. She poked the fire desperately as if she would endeavour to rouse from it some spark of encouragement. It smoked worse than ever. She tried again, and it began to show signs of going out, after which she left it alone. She half made up her mind to go downstairs again and talk to Sydney, she half made up her mind to go out and forget her troubles in the whirl of the streets, she half made up her mind to go to bed as she had originally intended. But she did none of these things. She continued to sit by the fire, and the fire continued to smoke. She got into a state of moody depression, and finally fell asleep. She awoke to find herself shivering and the fire out. She glanced at the watch on her wrist. It was past twelve o'clock; she must have been asleep some hours. She got up and stretched. She felt in that semi-comatose condition which invariably attends the awakening from sleep in one's clothes. She began to undress and went to her dressing-table and brushed her hair, which she always found stimulated her. It didn't fail in this instance. Indeed, it stimulated her so much that it deprived her of all desire to go to bed. She knew that she ought to go to bed, that she ought to have been there hours ago, that she required all her strength for the morrow—or rather, that day. She finished undressing and got into bed.

But she couldn't sleep. She didn't want to sleep, sleep would shorten the hours that remained before she had to go into the witness-box. The approaching ordeal seemed more dreadful every time that she thought of it; the thing had got thoroughly on her nerves. She tossed restlessly in her bed, she pictured the coming scene in court, herself in the box, the crowd of staring, curious faces watching her, the smile of contempt on every one of them as she told her story, the eagerness with which they followed her cross-examination, the sceptical and caustic comments of the judge; the scene she had pictured was so horribly real that she had to sit up in bed to convince herself that it was not so. She made a supreme effort to take herself in hand. She told herself that she was a coward and a fool. There was nothing to be afraid of, she was innocent, and she was going to win. Win what? Jerry?

A sudden shiver shook her. Her fear of the trial itself merged in a still greater one—the result. What would come after? If she won, she would win Jerry, and she would lose Langton. No, she wouldn't even win Jerry, for he believed her to be guilty, the verdict of the jury wouldn't alter his opinion. Poor Jerry! She was sorry that he should think so badly of her. She had never troubled about his opinion of her, but she would have liked to alter his present one.

Would the verdict of the jury convince any one? Was she not already condemned in the eyes of the world and her friends? Would she not be trebly condemned after her cross-examination? She could see the faces of her friends as they congratulated her on a barely won victory, and she could hear them when

they discussed her afterwards, saying to each other with a raising of the eyes and a little shrug of the shoulders, "*lucky*, you know, *very lucky*."

So she would lose her friends—and Langton. No. Yes. She must lose him. They couldn't continue as friends after what had passed, and they certainly couldn't continue as anything else. Perhaps, after all, it wouldn't so very much matter if she did lose. The disgrace? She had that any way. Even if the jury proclaimed her to be an innocent woman? They wouldn't do that. At the best their verdict would only imply that they were not satisfied that she was a guilty one. And if they found her guilty? Well, she would have Langton. He would marry her, and they would live it down in time. Madge Fairborough had found her way back, surely she could do the same. Not that she wanted to find her way back. She would have her lover, that would be enough.

Again a wave of fear swept through her. If they lost their case—she and Langton—would things be the same between them? Once more the prospective scene of her cross-examination rose in her mind. In imagination she heard the questions that would be asked her—"What was this man to her? Did she love him? Had she ever loved him?" and so on through a veritable gamut of agony. She pictured her own utter collapse in the box, and Langton taking her place and being put on the rack in his turn. Could things ever be quite the same between them after an experience like that? Would they not be two maimed and tortured human beings flung contemptuously out of court by their tormentors and humiliated in their own eyes and each other's by what they had gone

through? All her pride revolted at the thought. She could see her lover pitying and sympathetic. At present he admired her, looked up to her. He had, indeed, to a certain extent leant on her, for it was her strength which had kept their relations pure. She desired his admiration and hungered for his love, but she didn't want his pity. Pity may be akin to love, but it is equally closely related to contempt. So there was no way out.

Thus Billy's thoughts wrestled within her throughout the long night and the slow dawn, and it was a drawn, white, haggard face that lay sleeping the sleep of absolute exhaustion when her maid entered the room to draw the blinds in the morning.

Billy was not required to be in court till noon, but Sydney was there punctually at half-past ten. He had professed a brotherly reluctance to leave her, but she had insisted on his going on in advance.

"There's no reason why you should miss part of the show," she said, "and, as a matter of fact, you fidget me."

So Sydney departed, with a sense of having done all that could possibly be expected of him, to Billy's intense relief, for she had a few things on her mind, and she didn't want her brother to be one of them.

There was an almost electric sensation of expectancy in the air of the court that morning, for the case had reached a most interesting stage from the point of view of the general public. Murray Paget took his seat with the complacent nonchalance of one who is the centre of observation. Murray Paget liked being the centre of observation—it suited him. Presently his client would arrive, and then she would occupy

that position, but for the time being he held the centre of the stage.

The usher cried "Silence" with boisterous aggressiveness, the judge slipped unobtrusively through the curtains which guarded the bench as if he hoped he wouldn't be noticed, and Murray Paget rose to open the case for the respondent.

"May it please you, my Lord, gentlemen of the jury," he began. "My friend in his opening speech described this case as being the story of an extraordinary marriage. Be that as it may, it is certainly the most extraordinary petition for the dissolution of one that has ever been presented to this Court; for it is not the petition of a husband seeking a divorce, but of his sister who is trying to divorce him against his will."

A ripple of appreciation spread through the Court. Murray Paget was obviously in good form that morning, and when that was the case he was worth coming to hear. His audience settled down to enjoy themselves at the expense of Jerry and Blanche. "The petitioner and his *sister!*" was the refrain which ran through the first part of the K.C.'s speech like the accompaniment to a song, but there was a wealth of sarcasm and innuendo introduced into the simple words, for Murray Paget was a specialist in the art of saying nasty things.

Sydney watched and listened admiringly. This was the sort of advocate he liked. He looked round to see how Jerry and Blanche were taking all the pretty things that were being said about them. Blanche was impassive save for an occasional fidget, but Jerry's eyes were fixed upon the face of Murray Paget in a

fascinated stare, much as if the latter were a boa constrictor, and he himself a rabbit waiting to be eaten. Sydney found the little man's face so irresistibly comic that he was reluctantly obliged to turn away his gaze lest he should burst into unseemly laughter. He again turned his attention to the speaker, who was now proceeding to deal with the evidence that had been given during the last few days.

"What does it amount to?" he cried scornfully; "what is the result of all this watching and prying upon these two people? It comes to this, that though every one of their acts has been scrutinized for months, enveloped by the atmosphere of suspicion, and peered at through the microscope of jealousy, not a single impropriety in their behaviour towards each other has been discovered. I wonder how many people in this court could go through such a test and emerge unscathed!"

"There was Mrs. Peters, you know," mildly murmured Sir Mathew Hake.

The young K.C. turned on him, hot with his oratory.

"Oh yes!" he echoed, "there was Mrs. Peters! Mrs. Peters who saw things and heard things that nobody else at any other time or place in the course of this continental tour ever imagined!" He turned to the jury and his voice became impressive with his earnestness.

"Do you think, gentlemen," he said, "that this man and woman, if they were guilty, would have been so careless in their conduct before that gossiping, prying, all-seeing Mrs. Peters, and so cautious when there were only unsuspecting foreign hotel attendants to note their actions?"

Murray Paget's speech began to produce a favourable effect upon the Court; one or two of the jurymen commenced to shift in their seats as do men whose minds are occupied by conflicting arguments, the judge began to take a leisurely interest in Murray Paget's remarks, which he had hitherto ignored. Sydney, with difficulty, restrained an inclination to clap, and Langton leant back in his seat contentedly, only regretting that Billy was not there to hear how very virtuous she had been. Indeed, as Murray Paget's speech proceeded, Langton began to feel a sense of righteous indignation that the conduct of himself and Billy should have been impugned at all. They had really behaved very well under exceedingly trying circumstances, and their mutual friendship was one of the beautiful things of life at which only the ill-conditioned and impure-minded could cavil. That is how Murray Paget's speech affected Langton. But Murray Paget was a persuasive speaker.

Billy's counsel had a difficult, up-hill task, but he was undoubtedly making headway. He couldn't win her case for her by his speech; her success or otherwise must depend on how she played her part in the witness-box. He was, however, paving the way for her to obtain a sympathetic reception, and his speech was a very artistic piece of work.

It was now nearing its end, and Billy had not yet put in an appearance. Sir Richard Maitland commenced his customary fidget with his glasses; surely she would not be late; it was dramatically indispensable that she should go into the box immediately her counsel sat down, otherwise his fine speech would result in a lamentable anti-climax. Perhaps she had

overslept herself? Surely not, for it was past twelve o'clock. He turned to Sydney inquiringly, but that young gentleman was occupied with a messenger boy, who had just handed him a letter. Sydney handed it unopened to the solicitor.

"This is for you," he said.

Sir Richard opened the letter and glanced at it carelessly. Then he made a motion as if to rise to his feet. Instead of doing so, he turned round and tugged at Murray Paget's gown. The K.C. had just reached his peroration and was in no mood to be interrupted.

"Be quiet, please," he whispered angrily.

"But look!" said Sir Richard; "it's important."

Murray Paget snatched up the letter irritably and scanned it without interrupting his speech; then he stopped speaking and the sudden silence was startling. He read the note through carefully and put it down. He paused for a moment. He was about to do the most dramatic thing of his life—and he liked doing dramatic things.

Then he spoke in a voice apparently devoid of emotion.

"My Lord," he said, "the respondent withdraws her defence."

CHAPTER XXVI

LANGTON found himself walking down the Strand without any precise recollection as to how he got there. The startling *dénouement* consequent upon Billy's extraordinary letter had, for the time being, completely deprived him of such thinking faculties as he possessed. He had been apparently the most unmoved person in court, probably because he was the most affected by what had taken place. His counsel and solicitor, on the contrary, had been quite excited. They had urged him to go on with his defence, as he was entitled to do in spite of Billy's action, but he had refused in the calmest manner possible.

"What on earth's the good?" he had said. "I stand or fall with Mrs. Aynesworth," and he had strolled out of court with a nonchalance which earned for him the reputation of being the most callous co-respondent on record, whereas he was only an excessively puzzled young man, whose brain had not yet been able to grasp the situation.

His head was buzzing when he got into the street. Everything seemed to be buzzing, motor cabs, 'buses, lorries, pedestrians, all the turmoil of London traffic, and his head seemed to be part of it. The events of the last few minutes might have occurred a very long time ago, he had such a foggy sort of consciousness of what they were. The placards of the early editions of

the evening papers with "The Extraordinary Marriage Case" in flashing black type met his eye at every street crossing, but conveyed no definite meaning to his mind. He did not feel that they had any connection with himself. The shock which he had received enveloped him in a merciful, mental mist which temporarily anæsthetized his senses.

It was only a temporary anodyne, however. By the time he arrived opposite Charing Cross his clouded brain was rapidly clearing, and in proportion as it did so the noise and bustle of the busy street became more and more irritating. It jarred upon him. He wanted to get away into some quiet corner and think. He turned into the railway station.

"First return to anywhere," he said to the booking clerk.

"Not on our line, sir," replied the facetious official.

"Well, give me a ticket to somewhere," said Langton.

The clerk must have noticed the note of distress in the speaker's voice, for he dropped his humour and became sympathetic.

"About half an hour out do you?" he inquired.

"Yes."

"Try Chislehurst then," said the clerk; "there's a train just starting."

So Langton went to Chislehurst.

By the time he got there he was nearly himself again, and a three-mile walk which he promptly undertook reduced him to the normal and gave him an appetite into the bargain. He lunched at a quaint little inn that happened to be handy. It also chanced to possess a small garden occupied by an untenanted

seat, a clothes-line in full sail, and a cat with one eye. It was not exactly a spot of rustic beauty, but that made it all the better for meditation, as no one was likely to come there.

Langton went into the garden after lunch, lit his pipe and proceeded to think things out.

He had gone into court that morning in quite a cheerful and hopeful frame of mind, which had been considerably increased as he sat and listened to the eloquence of Murray Paget. Then had come Billy's letter——

He bit at his pipe savagely.

Why on earth had she done it? Had she gone mad? What was the meaning of it all? To lose a case fighting was one thing, but to plead guilty was quite another. In the first instance one could always say that there had been a miscarriage of justice, but in the second one was branded for ever. He and Billy were labelled self-confessed sinners for the rest of their lives. And the worst of it was that they were not sinners at all—at least, not in the sense that their own avowal proclaimed that they were.

He knocked the ashes out of his pipe and crammed fresh tobacco into the hot bowl. The position was momentarily becoming more clear to him, and the clearer it became the more unpleasant it appeared. He could see the faces of his men friends when next he entered the club—perhaps it would be as well not to go there for the present—the decided aloofness of his feminine ones when he met them in the street—it would certainly be advisable to cross the road and avoid them. Of course it would all blow over in time as far as he was concerned, for the world is disposed to

be forgetful of masculine misdeeds; but as for Billy —well, she was damned for ever. She had damned herself. She had gone on to the housetops and publicly proclaimed herself a wrongdoer. That isn't done. The world couldn't be expected to forgive that!

So Billy must always remain under a cloud. Yes, but she was going to be his wife. He didn't want his wife to be a perpetual pariah. They had arranged to marry if things went wrong, but he had never contemplated that they would go as wrong as this. It wouldn't have mattered if they had fought and lost—they could have lived that down, or even if they had never defended at all—the comparative absence of publicity would have enabled them to live that down also. As it was—well, he must reconcile himself to a comparatively solitary existence shared by Billy.

What more did he want? He shook his pipe out again and started another. There had been a time when he had thought that he didn't want more. Of course he had been very much in love then. Was he not very much in love now? Ye—es, but one can't be always at boiling-point. At Dieppe he had thought that he couldn't bear to have Billy out of his sight, but he had been for several months without her since then —and he had had a very good time. Yes, a very good time. Of course she was an awful darling, but she wasn't absolutely essential to his existence. One must take a sensible view of these things.

And they would have *won* their case; he was sure of that after hearing Murray Paget's speech, and, if they had, everything would have been all right. He had once said that he rather hoped they might lose?

Well, one says all sorts of things on the spur of the moment. Especially when one's in love. Perhaps he wasn't in love now? He picked up a small stone and threw it in the direction of the cat, which was placidly regarding him with its solitary eye.

Oh yes he was; Billy was splendid company. Well, he was going to have plenty of it in future!

He got out of his seat. He must go and see Billy. He suddenly found himself surprised that he had not done so before. He had been so concerned about himself that he had really not thought about her at all. He began to feel penitent. Of course he ought to have gone to her at once. Poor Billy! She must be at home eating her heart out, wondering why he didn't come, and ready to fly into his arms the moment he arrived. The prospect was attractive. He paid his bill, walked to the station and took the next train to London.

He was in a very chastened mood as he made his way to Queen's Gate. He felt that he had neglected Billy when he ought to have been there to comfort her. Poor dear! She must have been half out of her mind when she sent that letter. She had doubtless realized her folly by now and was in deep distress at the injury she had caused him. Well, he would soon put that all right, and when she asked him to forgive her he would kiss her and tell her there was nothing to forgive. He was really feeling quite noble in his prospective benevolence as he rang the bell and asked if Mrs. Aynesworth was at home.

So that it came as rather a shock to him when he found her in the drawing-room calmly partaking of buttered toast and tea.

"Hullo! Frank," she said. "I thought you'd turn up some time, so I waited in."

Langton was not prepared to abandon his preconceived attitude so suddenly. He went up to her and kissed her tenderly.

"Poor darling!" he said.

"Poor you!" she laughed. "I'm all buttery."

He sat down, with his brain in a whirl at his unexpected reception, and mechanically took the cup of tea she offered him.

"Please explain," he said in as calm a voice as he could manage.

"Well, in the first place," she replied, "I've arranged with Sir Richard Tremayne that I pay the costs—they gave them against you, you know."

"Oh, blow the costs!" he snapped irritably. "Why did you do it—withdraw your defence, I mean?"

"Because we were bound to lose anyway, so what was the good of being blackguarded in the witness-box for nothing?"

"We weren't bound to do anything of the sort. We were winning all along the line. You should have heard Murray Paget's speech this morning; it was splendid."

"And supposing we had won?"

"Well, that would have been all right, wouldn't it?"

"I should have lost you, Frank. Would that have been all right?"

Billy's voice quavered. Langton shifted uneasily in his seat and spilt his tea.

"No," he said, mopping it up, "of course it wouldn't. Still, you shouldn't have done it for——"

"I was glad to do it for you," she interrupted proudly.

Langton started and spilt some more tea. He put his cup down to save further mishaps—there wasn't much left in it. Billy's last remark had completely flabbergasted him. This was an entirely new aspect of affairs, a totally different debtor and creditor relationship to what he had conceived. Billy had sacrificed her character for him and was proud of it. Apparently he was intended to feel grateful. He didn't feel a bit grateful. He concealed his feelings under a forced smile.

"Still," he said, "you needn't have used dynamite. You might have spoken to me about it first. It was an awful shock."

"I suppose it was," said Billy, "but I only thought of it at the last moment. Oh, I had an awful time last night, I can tell you. I knew that whatever happened our characters were gone for ever——"

"Oh, did you?" interrupted Langton with angry sarcasm; "I didn't know it, anyhow!"

She looked at him surprised.

"Why, Frank," she said, "what's the matter?"

He controlled himself with an effort.

"Nothing, dear," he said, "go on. You were saying that you had an awful time."

"Yes," she continued. "I didn't sleep a wink all night. If we won the case, our characters were gone and we lost each other; if we lost the case we had each other, or rather as much of each other as was left after they had finished ballyragging us in the box. I tell you candidly, Frank, I funked it."

"It's not like you to funk things," he commented.

"I know, and I shouldn't have funked this if our going on had been any good. But it wasn't, not the least. And then at last, this morning, when I was feeling awfully rotten, I thought of that letter. I suppose I ought to have seen you first, but there wasn't time. I just sat down and scribbled it right away. Oh, you can't think what a relief it was to me when it was sent off and the wretched thing was done with. I've felt as right as rain ever since."

Langton couldn't stand it any longer. Billy was always cock-sure of herself, but on this occasion she was cock-sure of him too. That was the limit. He got up with obvious impatience.

"I think you ought to see a doctor," he said.

"Good Lord!" cried Billy. "Why? I'm all right now?"

Langton lost his temper.

"Oh, damn!" he said, and kicked over a footstool and hurt his foot.

Billy began to see that something was wrong. Her eyes clouded with apprehension, for she loved this man.

"You're not angry with me, Frank?"

He snatched at his hat and moved towards the door.

"Yes, I am," he answered. "I think you've behaved like a fool!"

CHAPTER XXVII

It isn't pleasant to be cut. Not even if you have anticipated it, prepared for it and convinced yourself that you don't care. You find that you do care. Billy found that she cared very much.

Not that she was ostentatiously cut. It was very quietly done. People whom she knew always chanced to be looking the other way when she passed them in the street. She took to avoiding them so as not to impose upon them the necessity of avoiding her. This on one occasion had awkward consequences, when she crossed the road to prevent meeting a dear friend of former days and the dear friend adopted the same manœuvre for the same purpose, with the result that they practically ran into each other on the opposite side of the street. The dear friend temporarily lost her presence of mind and was about to speak instead of passing on, so Billy did the cutting herself and calmly pursued her way with the feeling that she had distinctly scored.

Billy, as has been said, was a person with many acquaintances but few friends—that is to say, in the real sense of the term. Consequently, her ostracism was perhaps more complete than would have been the case with some one differently circumstanced. Mrs. Mervyn stood by her, and Lady Fairborough, and Mabel Cartright, and of course Jim—that is to say,

their attitude of friendliness towards her remained unaltered. They, of course, did not doubt her guilt. How could they when she herself had proclaimed it?

Jim she saw but seldom, for his increasing practice occupied more and more of his attention. Billy was really not sorry for this, for Jim was not a very cheerful companion under existing circumstances. He used to sit silent for minutes at a time and regard her with sympathetic, sorrowful eyes, which Billy found most depressing. She longed to tell him that she wasn't really as wicked as he thought her—for she valued his good opinion—but on reflection she wasn't sure that he wouldn't think her still more wicked if he knew the real facts of the case; Jim had such peculiar notions. Anyhow, she didn't tell him, nor any one else, and, after a time, she got accustomed to being considered as bad as, by her own act, she had asked people to believe.

Billy's conduct may seem to require some explanation. It has been stated that in many respects she was almost a sexless creature. Yet, her behaviour in embracing a shame of which she was innocent in order that she might marry her lover would, on the contrary, seem to imply that she was a creature whom passion impelled to fling reason to the winds. So to judge might be rational but it would be to misunderstand Billy. She was able to do almost lightheartedly what no woman uninfluenced by passion could do because she so utterly failed to appreciate the gravity of what she did. She had trampled unconcernedly upon the conventions all her life and she was being unconventional now. Very unconventional, no doubt. She admitted this much to herself, but her conscience did

not prick her for having assumed an offence of which she was innocent, possibly because it was an offence of which she was incapable. For Billy was a clean-minded girl. All her dealings with Langton had shown that. She had been forced into the Divorce Court, and had finally made use of it as a means of escape from an impossible position. It may be said of her that she had a sense missing—the moral sense—and truly said, so long as one remembers that that does not imply the substitution of an immoral one.

But her present position by no means gave her undiluted satisfaction. It is true that she had experienced a great feeling of relief when she had penned her memorable letter and despatched it. That was the relief which always follows the adoption of a definite course of action after a period of suspension and doubt.

True again that when Langton saw her that evening she was quite satisfied with herself. His criticism of her conduct had been the first blow to her self complacency, and others speedily followed—the avoidance of people she knew, the inquisitive stares of those she did not but who knew her, and, worst of all, the distress caused to her parents. Her mother was loving and tearful—she came up to London to see her erring daughter and cried over her till Billy broke down herself; it took a lot to make Billy cry. Her father—didn't come up to London and, from what her mother told her, Billy was glad of it. Sydney—well, Sydney was a younger brother and could be sat upon, an operation which Billy could be trusted to perform thoroughly.

She saw a good deal of Mrs. Mervyn and Lady

Fairborough—that is to say, they came to see her, as she couldn't call on them for fear of meeting people. She thoughtlessly did so once—about a week after the case was over—and of course walked into a regular crowd.

"Never again!" she remarked as she left. "Why I seemed to turn all their tea sour."

Langton was her most constant companion. He turned up at Queen's Gate on the day after his outburst in her drawing-room. He was in a most apologetic mood, and she, of course, forgave him at once. But although they were continually together they didn't get very much satisfaction out of each other's society. Their actions were so limited, for they were marked people. Golf and rinking were out of the question, the studio seemed to have lost much of its attractiveness—anyhow, in Billy's eyes, after the suggestions which had been made in reference to it—so they had to fall back upon the theatres and such-like methods of passing the time. Even at the theatre they were not safe from the significant looks of people they knew. Curiously enough, Langton was the most sensitive of the two on this point. But then Billy was very much in love.

"This is awful," he said at last one day. "Look here, let's cut and run."

"Meaning?" said Billy.

"Let's go right away together where nobody knows us."

"As we did before?" she asked.

"No, certainly not. I'm sick of the brother and sister game. We'll go as we ought to do, as man and wife. After all, it doesn't matter. The decree will be

made absolute in six months, and then we'll get married and be respectable people world without end."

Billy shifted uneasily in her seat.

"I'd rather not," she said. "I'd rather wait till after the decree."

"But why?" he queried, surprised. "What difference does it make. All the world knows——"

"There you're wrong," she interrupted. "The world doesn't know, only you and I know; the world thinks it knows."

"Well, it's the same thing," he objected.

"It isn't at all," she answered. "There's our self-respect—anyhow, there's mine."

He took a turn up and down the room before he answered her. Then he sat down and his voice had softened.

"You're an awful good sort, dear," he said. "You mean you want to play the game so far as Jerry is concerned right up to the end."

"That's about it," she answered. "You see, I'm his wife until the decree is absolute. Of course he thinks, as everybody does, that I've gone back on him, but you and I know that I haven't, and—while I'm his wife I'm not going to. It may be just a fad of mine, but there it is."

"All right," he assented; "but if we can't go away together, what shall we do?"

"Go away separately," she replied. "Oh yes," she continued laughing, "I can spare you for six months now that I know that I am going to have you for ever. Before it was different."

So Billy and Langton ceased to be one of the minor improper entertainments of London. Langton departed

on a motor tour, armed with his golf clubs and promising to write full accounts of his doings, and Billy remained in London in a state of "suspended social animation," as she remarked to Lady Fairborough the next time she called.

"Poor dear!" said the latter; "you're just entering the tunnel, and it's a long, dark one, but there's daylight the other end."

"Yes," replied Billy, who was feeling rather down in the mouth, "but it's only a horrid little blur at present."

CHAPTER XXVIII

CHRISTINE SELDEN was an adorably pretty girl—at least, Langton thought so. He had known her now for about a week, so he had had ample opportunity of judging. Christine was staying with her mother at the Hygienic Hotel, Aston Pines—or rather, living there, for they had arrived about a year ago for the benefit of Mrs. Selden's health and had stopped ever since. Mrs. Selden was a delicate, frail woman with a tendency towards chest trouble, and Aston Pines was apparently created by a thoughtful Providence for the express purpose of being the residence of people so circumstanced, for it provided them with air that was bracing enough to stimulate their lungs, whilst it remained sufficiently soft not to disturb their hearts. Moreover, Aston Pines was fortunate enough to obtain a more than average share of any blue sky and sunshine with which this country might occasionally be favoured. Consequently, the Borough Council, with a due sense of what the aforesaid Providence had done for them in the way of natural attractions, declined to provide any on their own account, a course of conduct which conduced to economy in the rates but hardly to the entertainment of the visitors. It has been suggested —in fact, one day at a council meeting it was boldly asserted in opposition to the proposal to institute a town band—that the visitors would have to come there

any way, so that the band would only be a useless waste of money. Indeed, the speaker said, "it was possible the visitors wouldn't like it if they got it," which, judging from the musical capacity of the town, was extremely probable.

Aston Pines was therefore an exceedingly dull place, and the visitors were consequently thrown back upon themselves and the resources of the hotels they patronized for entertainment. Most of the hotels possessed similar views to the Borough Council on the subject, but the Hygienic was slightly more enterprising, for it laid out a nine-hole golf course in the extensive grounds which belonged to it, and provided what is called "weekly entertainments." "Weakly entertainments" they were styled by one of the guests who passed as a wag—humour is cheap at Aston Pines—and the title was certainly well deserved, for they consisted in the management permitting such strolling entertainers as visited the town to give a show in the hotel drawing-room, and afterwards to go round with the hat. No strolling entertainer was ever known to repeat the experience, however, for the results were not financially encouraging. As for the nine-hole golf course, it could only be called such by courtesy. It had nine holes with flags in them, and nine precisely similar mounds of earth, deposited there by the hotel gardener under the impression that he was creating bunkers. He was also under the impression that the roller which stood in one corner of the course was intended to be a permanent fixture, and that such grass cutting as might become necessary would form a pleasant source of exercise for the visitors if they could find the lawn-mower. There was also a tennis court in the hotel

garden. It was marked out on an extremely lumpy lawn, and the net was in a condition which permitted balls to be served over it or *through* it at pleasure, thus catering for all tastes.

The presence of Christine Selden at the Hygienic is naturally explained by that of her mother, but it was certainly not the place in which one would have expected to find Langton. As a matter of fact, it was pure accident which brought him there, the pure accident being caused by defective steering through Aston Pines High Street of the driver of the Borough Council's steam roller—or of Langton; it is a question upon which both the parties involved held widely divergent views. The steam roller easily came off best, and Langton was obliged to put his car into hospital; he himself was unhurt. The man at the garage told him that it would "only be a matter of two or three days"—but they have a different standard of measuring time in Aston Pines than in any other place in the world, and it was a week before he saw it again. Then he didn't recognize it, for it was somebody else's car which they had repaired by mistake, the owner of which had long since given up hope of its ever being repaired at all. This meant more delay, but Langton didn't chafe at it so much as he might otherwise have done—for by this time he had got to know Christine Selden.

He had to put up at the Hygienic, it being obviously the best hotel in the place, and he very soon became acquainted with the Seldens. His table was next to theirs, and the waiter happened to upset *his* soup over *their* tablecloth. This naturally led to apologies from Langton, and a discussion on waiters in general, and

this waiter in particular. It also led to their sharing Langton's table for the rest of the meal, at the conclusion of which they had got to know each other extremely well. Mrs. Selden liked the new-comer very much. He was quite an attractive young man, and attractive young men rarely visited the Hygienic. Had she known that he was a recently created co-respondent she might not have liked him so much. But she didn't know that, and there was no one in the hotel to enlighten her. Aston Pines takes but a languid interest in the affairs of the outside world, and the intelligence which it brings to bear upon the morning newspapers is extremely limited.

After dinner Langton went into the lounge and wrote to Billy. He wrote to her now several times a week, and she was equally communicative. He sometimes found this correspondence rather an effort, for he was not a ready writer. Of course, a lover should have no difficulty in writing to the one he loves—but then that depends upon how much he loves her. Langton told himself that he loved Billy very much. He was always giving himself this piece of information now—formerly it wasn't necessary. To-night he found letter-writing easy. He had a good deal to say, especially about steam rollers. He also mentioned the dinner incident—" the mother is a charming woman," he wrote, " and the girl seems quite nice, and is rather pretty. Her name is Christine."

His intimacy with Christine began the next day. He strolled out after breakfast for a smoke, and found her putting on one of the greens of the golf course. It was a very bad green, and an equally bad performance on her part. Every time her ball swerved off

the line, and never went within a yard of the hole.

"Oh, bother the thing!" she cried pettishly at last.

"Let me see if I can help you," he said, picking up her putter, which she had thrown on to the ground.

He studied the line of putt carefully—there was a very big slope away from the hole; he made due allowance for it, and made his stroke. His ball started off in any direction but that of the hole, then it encountered a dip which deflected it somewhat, then another, and then the trend of the slope caused it to curve right round on to the hole, it hovered on the brink and disappeared.

"That was lucky," said Langton; "but you see the idea. You must allow for the hill—'borrowing,' we call it."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "what a lovely shot! You must be an awfully good player."

"I've played a good deal," he replied modestly, but her outspoken admiration was very sweet to him.

"Would you like to have a round?" he asked her presently.

"I should love to," she answered; "but I'm no good at all; I'm only a beginner."

"All the better," he said; "then, perhaps, I may be able to give you a few hints."

They went indoors and fetched their clubs—his, war-worn, well-polished veterans; hers, rusty but inexperienced recruits. They went to the first tee. It was a plain, simple hole, about two hundred and fifty yards long, and with no obstacle between the tee and the green except the badly kept course with its

excruciating lies and the harmless mound of earth that has been mentioned. Langton let fly at his ball with all his might and hit a perfect drive which pitched just short of the green and ran on to within a dozen feet of the hole. The wind was slightly against him, and the shot was a remarkable one.

He turned to his companion with expectant pride in his eyes.

"Where is it?" she asked. "Was it a good one?"

Her untrained eye had been unable to follow the flight of the ball. Langton was disappointed, for he had expected applause.

"It wasn't a bad one," he said; "it's somewhere on the green."

Then he got all the applause he wanted. Under normal circumstances they would have proceeded to the ladies' tee, which was about thirty yards in front of them, for Christine to drive. But she didn't want to drive; she wanted to see where this, to her eyes, extraordinary shot had gone. When they arrived at the green, and Langton succeeded in holing his putt—it was a bit of a fluke, but there was no occasion to say so—her admiration knew no bounds.

"Why," she cried, "you're a regular magician," and after that she declined to play at all herself, but insisted on his doing so, and followed him round and applauded all his shots, good, bad, and indifferent—and he made a good many indifferent ones, which under the circumstances was not to be wondered at.

After that it is easy to see how the intimacy between Langton and Christine grew. He was peculiarly susceptible to admiration. He had got it, of course, from Billy, but it was not supplied by her in the wholesale

manner in which he now received it. Billy had admired him as one who could do things rather better than herself, Christine admired him as one who could do things which she would never be able to do at all. Of course, Christine's admiration was merely the unreasonable adulation of a mere girl, whereas Billy's had been more matured; but Langton found it intensely satisfactory, for all that. Most people may deplore his weakness in being gratified by this hero worship; but then, most people do not get the chance of being weak in that way themselves.

The time arrived when even the Aston Pines garage managed to effect the necessary repairs to Langton's car, and he was at liberty to depart. But somehow he wasn't inclined to do so. Aston Pines had become very attractive to him. He found it rather difficult to explain this to Billy in his letters—she had been curious as to his long stay in one spot—"the air is beautiful," he wrote, "and the scenery all that can be desired,"—he would have found it difficult to expatiate upon the scenery, for it was practically non-existent—"there is quite a good golf course here too," —this was an awful lie; he felt he must qualify it a little, so he wrote:—"at least it is awfully handy, which is a great recommendation."

To his credit, be it said, Langton had no actual knowledge of how far his relations with Christine had progressed. She, poor little simple soul, had fallen hopelessly in love with this tall, strong man with the laughing eyes who had come into her life. She had met but few men, and she had never met a man like him before. She thought he was wonderful, and she was too natural not to show it. At first all went well.

They had a very good time together. She owned a camera, and they snapshotted each other until she had used up all her films, and he filled a sketch book with more or less accurate portraits of her—that is to say, when he wasn't trying to teach her golf, a very pleasant task, but a hopeless one.

Then, one evening, an incident happened which partly opened his eyes to the true position of affairs. The management of the Hygienic Hotel, stirred by an unwonted impulse, organized an hotel dance. It was quite a small, homely affair, but an attempt was made to make it as gay as possible by means of decking the "ball-room"—so named for the occasion—with multi-coloured draperies and a few Japanese lanterns. Not many guests took part in the dance, but Langton and Christine did—the latter regarding it as "awful fun." Langton was practically her only partner. Mrs. Selden was quite content; she liked the young man, and she knew nothing against him.

Langton was waltzing with Christine when rather an alarming thing happened which might have had serious consequences. One of the Japanese lanterns caught fire, and commenced to splutter flames in dangerous proximity to the flimsy decorations. Some fool shouted "fire!" and another fool tried to blow the burning lantern out, which, as it was about some feet above his head, was a singularly silly proceeding. Langton left his partner, and giving a little jump, clasped the lantern in his hand, tore it from its fastening, and stamped it to tinder. It was a very small thing to do, but it was quickly and neatly done, and it undoubtedly saved the situation. Langton ruined his glove in the process, and slightly burnt his hand.

"I'm afraid that's the end of this waltz," he said as he rejoined his partner; "unless you want your back covered with soot. Shall we go and sit the rest of this out?"

They sought a secluded spot, and then, to Langton's intense surprise and embarrassment, Christine burst into tears.

"Oh," she sobbed, "it was noble of you."

"What nonsense!" he laughed; "any fool can pull down a lantern."

"But no fool did," she answered. "I think you're——"

She didn't finish her sentence, but she looked at him with swimming eyes, and in those eyes Langton saw what he had read in the eyes of somebody else. It brought him to his senses. This wasn't playing the game to Billy—or Christine.

A week later he left. He felt that it was the only thing to do. He was going to marry Billy, not Christine. It wasn't fair to the latter that he should stay. It wasn't fair to Billy. A little longer and he felt that he might have wavered in his allegiance to her; he had an uneasy feeling that he was wavering now.

So he went.

Christine's distress at his departure was painfully transparent.

"You'll come back?" she queried, trying to speak calmly.

"Oh, I expect so," he answered. "Oh yes, I'm sure to," he added hastily as he saw her lip quiver. He was determined that he would do nothing of the sort; he could easily write later and explain.

Christine at the last moment brought him a little book.

"It's the photographs you took of me," she explained; "they've just come from the developing man, and I mounted them in here myself."

"Thanks awfully," he murmured in a husky voice. The girl's gift touched him deeply. He felt that he had behaved badly to her, trifled with her affections. He endeavoured to console himself with the thought that he had not intended to, but it gave him small comfort.

Experienced worldly people will doubtless say that Christine was a forward little minx, that she had thrown herself at the head of this man, and that she deserved all that she got. Experienced worldly people are not fit judges of the childlike heart of an inexperienced girl like Christine. This was her first love affair, and she gave all that she had openly and freely. Doubtless, as she became older and more like her judges, she would give less.

And now a bad time set in for Langton.

He had left Christine because he had realized that she had fallen in love with him. He was now to realize that he had fallen in love with her. The truth did not come to him all at once, but gradually, as he journeyed from place to place and found that her face, her form, her every gesture, were always present in his mind. He sought to drive her out of it by writing long letters to Billy. Needless to say, those letters contained no mention of Christine. But the remedy was ineffective. He wrote to Billy, but he thought of Christine. "Come back, come back," he seemed to hear her say. He wanted to do so awfully.

He took himself seriously to task over the matter. He reviewed all Billy's charms, and compared them with the attractions of this chit of a girl. Pooh! Billy won in a canter, her rival was a mere child with nothing to recommend her but a pretty face and kittenish ways. Ah, but the mere child had found a place in his heart that Billy had never occupied. Billy was a pal, their friendship was a co-partnership; Christine was a little loving soul of which he was the sole proprietor. Billy regarded him as a companion, Christine as a protector; the one would march through life on his arm, the other wanted to be carried. It was the call of the weak to the strong—a call that seldom fails.

He raged within himself at his defection, combated it. Billy was all that any man could desire, and she loved him. And he loved her. That was true. He did honestly, sincerely, but it was the love of a brother for a sister, not of a husband for a wife. Well, anyhow, he had got to marry her. Got to? Of course he was going to. Then why think about this other girl? He must put her out of his mind.

And he tried to, tried hard, motored here and there, and golfed on various courses, but always that imagined cry "come back" rang in his ears.

So he went back to Aston Pines.

CHAPTER XXIX

"DEAR FRANK,

"Neither you nor I seem to be sufficiently famous for Aston Pines to have the slightest idea who we are. At any rate, you appear to have been able to spend a considerable time there and pass for a respectable person! So as I am bored with trotting about to uninteresting places I propose to come and sample the attractions of the Hygienic Hotel for a day or two. I expect you will see me about as soon as you do this letter, and I hope you will be pleased!

"Yours,

"BILLY."

This was the letter, written with the most innocent intentions in the world, which Langton found on his breakfast plate one morning. It is unnecessary to enlarge upon the emotions with which he read it. He was relieved that Christine was late for breakfast that morning—her mother never came down to it—for it enabled him to think out some plan of action. He wasn't long in making up his mind. He and Billy mustn't meet at that hotel, and, since she was coming there, he must leave, and at once if he was to avoid her. He rushed upstairs and flung a few things into a bag, came down again, paid his bill up to date, explained to the office clerk that he was called up to London on

business and should be back in a few days, and made for the station as fast as a fly could take him.

Arrived at the station he found that he had half an hour to wait for a train—he had left in far too great a hurry to consult a time table—but, fortunately, it was still early, and Billy couldn't arrive from London for some hours. He leant back in his carriage with a sigh of relief when his train started. He hadn't the slightest idea of what he was going to do, but at any rate he had dodged an awkward situation. The idea of running away from Billy was rather comic when he came to think of it—especially as he was going to marry her in a few weeks' time. Was he going to marry her? Of course he was. He wasn't going to break his word. He was an honourable man. Was he? Well, he couldn't help Christine falling in love with him, nor himself with her. It was very unfortunate. But he was going to marry Billy.

So Langton rattled Londonwards what time Billy pursued her way in exactly the opposite direction. Langton lunched at his club and Billy at the Hygienic Hotel. She had inquired for Langton at the office when she arrived and, needless to say, was considerably surprised at his sudden departure. However, she was at Aston Pines now, so she might as well stop. She went into the dining-room and chose a table for lunch. She selected a secluded spot. It was from habit rather than necessity, for she was sure nobody knew her there, but she had been keeping out of the limelight a good deal lately.

The head waiter came and attended to her wants. He was a conversational soul who deemed it his duty to make things bright and cheerful for visitors at the time

of their arrival and departure—especially the latter. During the intervening period he left them severely alone. He now remarked upon the fineness of the weather, the length of Billy's journey, and incidentally directed her attention to the contents of the *menu*. Billy glanced at it carelessly.

"Is the house full?" she queried.

"Oh no, ma'am, this is not exactly our season. Still we have a tidy few—a tidy few."

Roberts—that was the head waiter's name—usually repeated the end of his sentences, it made more of them.

"A Mr. Langton is staying here, isn't he?" continued Billy.

"Was, ma'am, was. But he's left now. Very sudden it was too; yes, very sudden."

"What was sudden?"

"Why, his leaving, ma'am. You see, he had been here quite a long time; oh, quite——"

"Staying for his health, I suppose?" Billy interrupted. She found Roberts' echo rather irritating.

Roberts almost permitted himself to wink, but, of course, he did nothing of the sort. He lowered his voice to the confidential tone peculiar to waiters.

"Well," he said, "it seemed to do him a 'eap of good; oh, a 'eap——"

"What was the matter with him?"

The head waiter became still more confidential.

"Well, ma'am, you see those two ladies,"—he directed Billy's attention to Mrs. Selden and Christine, who were sitting at the opposite side of the room—"Mr. Langton, he sat at that table, and—oh, it did him a *'eap* of good," he chanted.

"Really!" said Billy; "is there anything special about that table?"

"Mr. Langton, he thought so," continued Roberts, "very special. Oh, I shouldn't be surprised," he added sentimentally, "if there was wedding bells in the air."

"What on earth do you mean?" asked Billy.

"Well, of course, I don't know anything," said Roberts, "but I rather think that Mr. Langton and the young lady are engaged, at least, if they aren't, I expects they soon will be, and a very pretty picture they'll make, I'm sure."

"Oh, are you?" said Billy; "I think I'll have some cold beef, please."

She ate her lunch, puzzled but not perturbed. She regarded the head waiter as a talkative busybody. It was certainly rather curious that Langton should have sat at that table, but then, it contained the only pretty girl in the room, so that merely showed his good taste. Probably he had flirted with her a little. Well, why shouldn't he? Billy was not jealous. Of course, he *had* stayed a very long time, but that was explained by the fact that there was a good golf course handy.

After lunch she went to have a look at the golf course. She had some difficulty in finding it. At length she appealed to the gardener, whom she met, to show her the way. He looked at her reproachfully.

"Golf course!" he said; "why, you're in the middle of it now."

Then Billy did begin to feel uneasy. "Quite a good golf course," Langton had called it. He couldn't have been referring to this dreary waste. Why, he

wouldn't have condescended to play on it. She turned to the gardener.

"Perhaps there are other links near here?" she said.

"Perhaps there are," he replied with withering sarcasm, "but I've lived 'ere man and boy fifty-six year come Michaelmas and I ain't 'eard on 'em," and he trudged off.

Billy's uneasiness increased. She wandered aimlessly about the hotel grounds for some time, and then sat down in a deserted summer-house which she came across. It was a dirty, ramshackle place, but she was not in the mood to bother about dust or cobwebs. Langton's conduct had been very extraordinary, and the more she thought about it the more extraordinary it appeared. She was not a jealous young woman, and she was quite sensible enough to accept such gossip as she heard with a liberal discount. Still, she could not get out of her mind the things that the head waiter had told her. He might be a fool, and he was obviously a gossip, but he had been quite sincere when he voiced his idea that Langton and that girl were engaged. "My word!" thought Billy, "Frank must have been going it!" She tried to think of it on that footing, that Langton had been merely flirting, had overdone it a bit perhaps, but—she couldn't avoid the reflection that he had apparently been so occupied for some considerable time. And again, his sudden unexplained disappearance was most unsatisfactory. She consoled herself with the thought that she would doubtless receive a letter by the next post which would make everything clear. It was ridiculous to suppose that he had run away from *her*, Billy. It was much more

probable that he had run away from that girl. Yes, of course, that was it—the girl had made a violent set at him, he had rather liked it—at first—any man would —and had finally found that he was getting too much of a good thing, and had cleared out.

Billy rose from her seat with a sigh of real satisfaction. She felt that she had solved the problem. She left the summer-house very much happier than she had entered it. But she had begun to take a dislike to Christine Selden. What a forward little thing she must be.

Poor little Christine was having rather a bad time at present. The disappearance of the man whom she considered the most wonderful being in the world was a great shock to her, especially as he had left without a word of explanation or farewell. Still, she took comfort from the fact that the hotel people expected him back. All the same, she thought that he might have found time to say good-bye. She determined to tell him when he returned that he had been very unkind.

Billy's expectations of receiving a letter from Langton were not disappointed. It arrived the next evening just as she was going in to dinner.

"I've been called up to London on business," he wrote, "and I don't quite know when I shall be back. Unless you are making a prolonged stay at Aston Pines, I don't think I shall come back at all, but wait here in Town till you return."

It was the "business" that worried her. What sort of business could he possibly have? He was obviously lying. And then, why wasn't he coming back? Because he was afraid. Afraid of what? And then her brow cleared. Of course he was afraid to come back

on account of the girl, he was afraid that Christine might continue to overwhelm him with attentions which had become unwelcome. He obviously wasn't afraid of her, Billy, because he was going to wait for her in London.

Billy was reading her letter at dinner. She glanced across the room at the opposite table. Christine was reading one too. It appeared to distress her. She crumpled it up and put it away in her dress and went on with her soup. Suddenly she put her spoon down, rose hurriedly from the table, and left the room. She didn't reappear that evening. Billy wondered whether it was the letter or the soup. She wasn't naturally a curious woman, but she would have given something to have read that letter. She was sure that it was from Langton. Well, why not? Probably he had thought it best to put a stopper on things. He had very likely told Christine that he was an engaged man.

It was very natural that Billy should desire to know more about Christine than she could ascertain by glancing at her across the dining-room. So she availed herself of the first opportunity that arose for making her acquaintance. She wondered what sort of girl this was, whose charms had first attracted and then terrified Langton. She hardly knew what she expected to find, but she certainly didn't expect to like her. As a matter of fact, she did like her very much. Christine's shy, subdued manner and sweet ways swept away all Billy's prejudices before the two had been talking together half an hour. Billy began to feel more hardly towards Langton, not for any defection from herself, but for trifling with the affections of such a fragile, inexperienced little soul as Christine. Here was no

woman of the world up to every move of the game of flirtation, but an unfledged beginner who had never held the cards in her hands before. Billy felt quite angry with Langton. Of course, he hadn't meant any harm; but he shouldn't have done it.

And so Christine found a friend in Billy.

Billy hoped that Christine's fancy for Langton might prove to be as passing as his had obviously been for her. With a view to ascertaining this she stayed on for a few days at the Hygienic, and during that time the two girls came to know each other very well. But Billy was in a very awkward position. She couldn't very well cross-examine the other as to the state of her affections, and Christine, whilst childishly open on all other subjects, was singularly discreet as to this.

At the end of a week Billy was no wiser as to whether this quiet little girl was still suffering from Langton's absence, or whether she was getting over it. She went up to bed that night puzzling over the matter. She paused outside Christine's bedroom door.

Christine had retired earlier than usual that evening, saying that she had rather a headache, but the light gleamed under her door indicating that she hadn't yet gone to sleep. Billy thought she would knock and say "good night." But she did not do so. A sound restrained her. It was the sound of some one sobbing as if her heart would break.

That told Billy what she wanted to know.

CHAPTER XXX

LANGTON walked in the direction of Queen's Gate, somewhat troubled in his mind. He was going to call upon Billy in response to a note which she had sent him apprising him of her return from Aston Pines. He was doubtful of the reception that he would get, but it wasn't that which was disturbing him. It was the vague uneasiness of which he was conscious at the prospect of seeing her again. Much had occurred since he had seen her last. He had met Christine and he had fallen in love with her. And he was still in love with her. That was a fact which he could not conceal from himself, but he must conceal it from Billy. For he was going to marry Billy. She must never guess that anything had come between her love and him. He knew that she loved him, and he earnestly desired to be worthy of it. But he couldn't help loving Christine.

Langton was an honest-minded young man, and he was awfully fond of Billy. He still loved her, and would always love her, but it was the love of a brother, and not that of a husband. The one may be as deep and true as the other, but the difference is fundamental. It was only since he had met Christine that this difference had become apparent to him. He had fought against it, striven with it since his return to London, as indeed he had

done on that previous occasion when he had said good-bye to Aston Pines. But as in the first instance he had given up the struggle and returned to Aston Pines, so now his mental conflict was equally unavailing to dispel the consciousness that he loved Christine and that he would marry her if he was a free man. However, he was not going to marry her, he was not going back to Aston Pines, and he was not going to see her again. He was going to tea with Billy.

It was several months since he and Billy had seen each other; he knew that she would be unchanged, but what about himself? A considerable change had taken place in himself, a change which operated as a dark curtain and seemed to intervene between all that had occurred before the time when he had met Christine and since. It made him feel almost a stranger when he rang the bell of Billy's house—it had been arranged that she was to stay on at Queen's Gate until the decree was made absolute. He hoped that she would be conscious of no alteration in him, no cooling of his affection for her. He determined to spare no effort to prevent that.

Consequently he overdid it. He kissed Billy with an effusiveness which was not natural to him. He didn't often kiss her, for their relations with each other were usually undemonstrative. There is all the difference in the world between the kiss which is inspired by passion and the kiss which is intended to convey that effect—the one is the effervescence of good wine, the other merely effervescence. Billy experienced an undefined dissatisfaction at Langton's embrace; there seemed to be something left out—the natural result of there being too much put in. She

went to the tea table, and officiated with the teapot.

"Two lumps, I suppose?" she said; "unless you've altered in your habits since you've been at Aston Pines."

There was a spice of malice in her remark which did not escape Langton's notice. He endeavoured to direct the conversation towards herself.

"And what have you been doing with yourself all this time?" he asked.

"Well," she replied, "for the last week I've been golfing at Aston Pines."

Langton nearly dropped his cup with surprise. Then it appeared to him that Billy was laughing at him. He looked at her suspiciously, but she was unconcernedly going on with her tea.

"Nice course, isn't it?" she remarked presently.

"Ye—es," he stammered.

"Did my game a lot of good," she continued, "but the grass was rather long. Did you lose many balls?"

"Not very many," he answered, "I—I didn't play very often."

"Sketching, I suppose?" queried Billy. "Have some more tea?"

"Thanks. Yes, I did a lot of sketching and—and motoring, and things of that sort."

He gulped down his second cup of tea. Billy had purposely left out the sugar to see if he would notice it. He didn't.

"Any one interesting stopping at the hotel?" she inquired.

Langton made a special effort to appear natural.

"No," he said, "no one particularly interesting."

"I wonder you don't choke," said Billy.

Langton was thoroughly startled, for Billy's voice had changed and her eyes sparkled. He tried to assume his most innocent expression.

"I don't know——" he began.

"Oh yes, you do," she interrrupted, "so it's no use your sitting there trying to look like a stained glass mediæval saint. There's no halo anywhere about you, but I'm not sure that there isn't a tail."

Langton laughed with obvious embarrassment.

"Further particulars please, as the lawyers say," he said.

"Christine!" replied Billy. "Shall I spell it for you? *Christine!*" She repeated the name with added emphasis.

"Oh lor!" said Langton; "has she been talking to you about me?"

"No," replied Billy, "she hasn't. If she had, I shouldn't have thought anything of it. She's merely crying her eyes out because she's fallen in love with a heartless flirt. Yes, that's what you are, Frank," she continued indignantly; "a heartless flirt!"

"Oh, draw it mild, Billy," began Langton, and then the remnants of his composure left him, for Billy's words had made him very uneasy about Christine.

"She's—not ill, is she?" he asked with sincere anxiety in his voice.

Billy relented when she saw the look of genuine distress on Langton's face.

"She's not ill," she said, "and I suppose she'll get over it, but there's no doubt that she's fallen deeply in love with you, and that she thought you were in love with her. Oh, I don't suppose you meant any harm,

Frank, but it was thoughtless of you and—and Christine's a darling. You oughtn't to have flirted with her—you see, she's so simple, she took you seriously."

Langton's head was swimming. He certainly hadn't expected to find Billy taking up the cudgels on behalf of Christine. He would not have been surprised to discover a little jealousy on her part. But here was no jealousy ; Billy was the active ally of the girl who had fallen in love with him, and sympathized with her for doing so. It had never entered her head that he might have fallen in love with Christine. He felt that he had better take his leave before Billy thought of cross-examining him upon the state of his own feelings. He had no occasion to fear, however, for it never occurred to her to do so. She turned the conversation into another channel by giving him a full account of her own doings.

"Winnie's written me such a sweet letter from Alberta," she told him. "She's getting on top hole, she's got a baby, and she's learnt how to ride a horse. Why, I could never induce her to go in a hansom because she always thought the horse would run away. She wants me to go out there and make my home with her and Sam. She seems to think I'm a poor lone thing, for she doesn't mention you."

"Perhaps," said Langton, "she thinks they hang unsuccessful co-respondents."

"I shouldn't be surprised," replied Billy ; "they very likely do over there."

The time slipped away pleasantly enough now that they had got away from the dangerous subject of Christine. Indeed, Langton found that he was enjoying himself extremely in Billy's society. He had an

uneasy feeling that under the circumstances he ought not to be doing so.

"The decree will be made absolute in a week or two's time," he said, as he rose to go, "and then we must think of getting married. A registrar's office, I suppose, will be the best, and the sooner the better, eh?"

"Just as you like, Frank," she said, "I leave all that to you. We shan't need to hire any one to watch the wedding presents!"

There was a bitter note in her chaffing remark. Langton turned to her, and the old tenderness was in his voice.

"Never mind, old girl," he said, "of course our marriage will be a hole and corner affair, but we've got many years in which to forget the trouble that led up to it."

"Yes," she replied softly, "all our lives."

Langton's uneasiness returned with redoubled force after he had left Billy and he was free to occupy his thoughts with what she had told him about Christine. He had been telling himself ever since he left Aston Pines that though he was suffering from the absence of Christine, she would not be suffering from that of himself. Now that illusion was dispelled. She was suffering. Oh, it was hard; he wanted her and she wanted him. What was most hard to bear was the thought that she must believe that he had been playing with her, that, in the words of Billy, he was "a heartless flirt"; he was not a heartless flirt, he wanted to go to her, to take her frail little form in his arms and tell her that he loved her, that he wanted to marry her, and that only a sense of duty

prevented his doing so. But he couldn't. His excuse was his crime. What right had he as an engaged man to let his affections and those of Christine become entangled? It was a question he had asked himself scores of times, and the answer was always the same—no right, but he couldn't help it.

He went to the theatre that night with a view to distracting his thoughts, but it was only a temporary relief, and he dreamt about Christine and Billy all night. His dream took the irritating turn that dreams do, Billy was urging him to marry Christine, and Christine was urging him to marry Billy. Finally, in order to escape the importunities of both, he jumped into a hansom and drove off in it through the wilds of Alberta. Then the horse bolted and tried to jump over a precipice, and he woke up just in time to save himself from falling out of bed. After which he went to sleep again and had a variation of the same dream in which he tried to marry both Christine and Billy, but neither would have him. Taking it all round, he passed an uncomfortable night.

He went into his studio the next day still worrying about Christine. It was a beautiful May morning, and the spring sunshine entered through the studio windows in a glorious flood of light. But to Langton it brought no comfort. He was thinking of Christine—"crying her eyes out," Billy had said. He pulled his easel into the middle of the room. On it was a newly painted canvas. It was an almost completed portrait of—Christine. He had painted it partly from memory, partly with the assistance of the photographs and sketches which he had brought back from Aston Pines. He had occupied himself in this way ever since his return.

It had given him something to do, it had prevented him feeling so utterly adrift from the girl he loved, for it was a link between him and her. In fact, he felt that he would not have been able to keep away from her had he not thought of this expedient for retaining her presence before his eyes. Langton was not a great painter, but this was a labour of love and it had inspired him. He had caught Christine's expression at her best, the childish, deep blue eyes, the laughing lips, the entrancing little dimple which coquetted between her cheek and her chin. But to-day he regarded it gloomily. This was not his Christine. This was a laughing, merry maid without a care in the world ; his Christine was a weeping, sad little girl full of trouble. Well, he would keep her as he last saw her, thus with her sunshine and her smile.

He took up his palette, there were still a few finishing touches to put in. But he couldn't get them right. As fast as he painted in, he had to paint out. At last he desisted. He was afraid of spoiling what he had done. He put on his hat and went out for a walk—his invariable remedy when he wanted to paint and couldn't—perhaps the air would clear his brain and steady his hand. The picture seemed to smile at him as he left the room, but it was a smile that bit into his soul.

He hadn't the slightest idea of what he was going to do with the picture when it was finished. He might, of course, send it to Christine, but he couldn't bear the idea of parting with it. He might keep it, but it would then only be a perpetual reminder of the girl he couldn't marry. However, he had been irresistibly impelled to paint it, and the pleasure he had taken in the task was

a sufficient justification, even if he never saw it again after it was done. He had a hazy idea of keeping it for ever locked up and just looking at it occasionally. There would be pain in that, but there would be pleasure too.

So Langton went out for a walk.

And whilst he was away Billy called at the studio.

"Out, is he?" she said; "all right, I'll sit down and wait till he comes back."

She walked into the sunlit studio and the portrait of Christine smiled at her. She didn't grasp the full significance of it at once. Her first impression was simply one of admiration.

"Oh, you darling!" she exclaimed; "I didn't know he could do it."

The little album of photographs caught her eye. She glanced at it carelessly. There were a lot of them—Christine on a bicycle, Christine trying to putt, Christine trying to do nothing but simply looking pretty. Christine, Christine, Christine, nothing but Christine.

Billy's hand shook a little. A little shiver ran through her. She felt cold. She didn't understand why there should be so many photographs of Christine. A sketch book lying on the floor attracted her attention. Why, that was a sketch of Christine, too. She picked up the book. It was full of sketches, and they were all Christine.

Then she looked at the picture again. Why had Langton painted it? That was carrying a flirtation rather far. Her breath came quickly. How—she hardly dared ask herself the question—how was it that he had painted it so well? She steadied her nerves with an effort and scrutinized the painting more

critically. Yes, this was no ordinary portrait, no mechanical production. It was inspired.

By what?

Billy sat down and a sob came into her throat. She understood.

It was an hour later that Langton returned. Billy was still sitting in the chair. She hadn't moved.

"Hullo——" he began when he saw her, and then he stopped. There was something in her face that he didn't understand.

"You love her," said Billy. Her voice sounded hard, unlike her own.

"My dear girl!"

"You love her. Oh, I don't blame you, Frank, but you love her."

"No," he said; "no, no, you mustn't say that, Billy."

"But it's true. Isn't it true, Frank?"

She got up from her seat. There was no hardness in her voice now, but a note of yearning. Oh, if it were not true!

Langton went up to her and took her in his arms.

"I love *you*, Billy," he said, "and I'm going to marry you. Do you think that I should be going to marry you if I didn't love you?"

"No," she replied, "I believe you do love me, but not as you love her. Tell me the truth, Frank, even if it hurts."

"I love you," he answered almost sullenly, "I shall always love you and I want you to be my wife."

Billy moved away from him. The hour which she had spent alone with the picture had not left her brain idle. It had been wracked with torturing thoughts. It had caused her to come to a decision. But she found

her resolution wavering now that the time had come to announce it. She walked to the window and gazed out into the little courtyard upon which the studio looked. A tree stood in the centre of it, and the sun gleamed upon the new-born leaves. Some sparrows were hopping about the courtyard industriously seeking food. Billy took in all these details with the acute perception of her surcharged brain. Then she turned to Langton.

"I can't marry you, Frank," she said; "no, don't interrupt; it isn't that I don't love you; it isn't that I think you don't love me, but I am not the woman who ought to be your wife."

She pointed to the picture.

"That is the woman," she said, "poor little heart-broken Christine, who thinks that you have deserted her. Poor old Frank, I know how you feel about it, I understand how you're now trying to play the game to me. But it can't be, it isn't fair, because you aren't playing the game to her. You couldn't help it, I couldn't help it—we're"—her voice broke—"we're badly bunkered, but it's all part of the game, and—and—we must make the best of it."

She couldn't help it, the tears would come. She threw herself on to the couch in a paroxysm of weeping. She knew that she was doing the right thing, that she had been involuntarily blocking the path which Nature summoned Langton and Christine to tread, that their true happiness depended upon her standing aside, that it was her duty to get off the road. But it was terribly hard to do the right thing, especially for her who had never bothered about doing it. She was giving up the man she loved. Why? Because she loved him.

Langton approached the couch and bent over her swaying form, his heart bleeding for her. He had never seen Billy cry. No one to his knowledge had ever done so—Billy was not the sort to display emotion.

"My poor darling!" he said; "don't—don't say these things. I'm—I'm going to marry you—I want to marry you."

He sat down beside her and tried to comfort her. Presently Billy recovered herself.

"It's all right now," she said, trying to smile, "we've got to make the best of a bad job. Dear old Frank! We've been the best of pals, haven't we? And always shall be, shan't we?"

Langton got up and paced the room. Emotion was rapidly overpowering him.

"Oh, Billy! Billy!" was all that he could say.

She rose from her seat.

"I'm going now, Frank," she said; "don't let's talk about this any more——"

He seized her in his arms almost roughly.

"I can't let you go like this," he protested, "I can't, I can't."

"You must, dear," she replied gently. "If I can stand it, you can."

Without giving him the opportunity of answering her, she broke from his arms, and half-crying, slipped out of the room. She stumbled rather than walked down Kensington High Street. She had no direct objective in her mind, but her footsteps led her into Kensington Gardens. It was thronged with people revelling in the soft spring air. Out-of-works sprawled on the grass gazing skywards, nursemaids pushed perambulators, read novelettes, and minded their

infant charges as the mood took them, the Round Pond glittered in the sunshine and diminutive yachts danced on its tiny waves whilst their diminutive owners watched their uncertain course with anxious eyes.

Billy sat down on a chair. She was feeling faint. A lot of things seemed to have happened in a very short time. She tried to sort them out as they careered through her brain. A feeling of hopelessness, friendlessness oppressed her. She felt so utterly alone. So this was the end. She would presumably end her life rounding up horses in Alberta. She had always looked down upon Winnie with sisterly superiority. But Winnie was a successfully married woman, she—— !

" I *have* made a muck of my life ! " she murmured.

A shadow fell across the path. She looked up. It was the man with the chair tickets.

" One penny, please," he said.

CHAPTER XXXI

BILLY was sitting at the writing-table in her boudoir. She read over the answer she was sending to Winnie's letter. "You're an awful dear," she had written, "and I'll come out by the next boat." She fastened up the envelope with a sigh of relief. That settled matters. There could be no turning back now. She had been impelled to her present somewhat hurried action by the importunities of Langton. He had by no means taken her decision as final, and had done all that argument and persuasion could effect to alter it. But Billy was not to be moved from the course she had taken. She appreciated the motives which actuated Langton in trying to force her to marry him, respected him for them, loved him for them, but she didn't waver in the least from her determination.

Langton was not the only one whom she had to combat in the matter. There was also Jim. He had called to see her the day after her scene with Langton in the studio, and she had told him everything.

Jim listened to her story, admiring and sympathetic, but he did not at all approve of her programme.

"You ought to marry Langton," he said; "he wants to marry you, and what better wife could a man want?"

"Ask Jerry," Billy had replied with a slight return to her former cheerfulness. "No, Jim," she said,

"it's up to me to clear out; it's a case of odd man out, and that's me," she concluded ungrammatically.

Jim saw that she was not to be moved from her purpose. Then the light of a sudden inspiration came into his eyes.

"Is there a chance for—any one else?" he asked.

Billy saw what he was going to say, but she stopped him. She went up to him and kissed him full and square on the lips—she had never kissed Jim before.

"Dear old brother," she said affectionately; "no."

And Jim didn't press her. He loved her with all the strength of his nature, would have given up all his prospects, everything for her, but he knew and had known for a long time that she didn't care for him like that. To her he was a brother, a dear brother, but nothing more; well, so be it.

"I'll come and see you off when you go," he said cheerfully, "and you must write, you know. Also, come back—some day."

"I don't think I shall ever come back," said Billy; "this is where I retire from the stage and take to cattle-raising."

She maintained her cheerful tone until he took his leave, but she was sore in her heart. Jim's intercepted proposal had touched her deeply; moreover, she was more fond of him than he knew. If only things had been different! As it was, he had his career to think of, or, at any rate, for her to think of. He had a future in front of him which would certainly be distinguished if not brilliant. She wasn't going to spoil that. She had wrecked her own life and possibly Jerry's; that was enough.

And so she had written to Winnie and accepted her

offer. Perhaps she could begin life again far away where nobody knew her. The prospect, however, did not appeal to her; the complete loneliness of it almost frightened her. It is true that she would have her sister; but her sister would have her husband, her baby and her home, whereas she would have none of those things. It was to be her home too? No, it was to be her refuge.

It was a new life upon which she was entering and an uncongenial one. The little domestic details that would occupy Winnie's mind and fill her with content would merely serve to irritate Billy. She could ride horses till she was tired? Yes, she probably would ride them until she was very tired indeed.

Billy was moved to sudden compunction by her thoughts. Surely she was very ungrateful, there might have been no helping hand held out to her in her trouble. Yes, that was true. She had a lot to be thankful for. It wasn't every one who would care to harbour a divorced woman with her guilt still fresh upon her.

Billy flushed with sudden shame. She hadn't quite realized the position before. Conscious of her own innocence, it was difficult for her to appreciate the consciousness of every one else of her guilt. Winnie was offering her an asylum; it was noble of her, but dreadful for Billy to accept. She took up her letter with the sudden inclination to tear it up. She wouldn't go at all. Yes, she would, but she would write a fresh letter and explain that she was not so bad as people thought. She picked up her pen, but dropped it again. The explanation was as bad as the misconception. Perhaps worse. Besides, she mightn't be believed? Surely her own sister would believe her. Sam wouldn't,

and Sam was Winnie's god. Perhaps she had better let it go; she could always explain later. Procrastination again!

Her reflections were cut short by the entry of the maid.

"If you please, ma'am," she said, "Mr. Aynesworth has called and would very much like to see you."

"Mr. Aynesworth!" echoed Billy. What on earth could Jerry want with her? Perhaps it was something about the house, for her occupation of it was to cease when the decree was made absolute. Well, that was a matter for their solicitors. She wasn't feeling up to seeing any one just then.

"Say that I'm not at home," she said to the maid.

"I did say that I thought you didn't want to be disturbed, ma'am, but Mr. Aynesworth said that it was most important that he should see you. He's in the drawing-room."

"In the drawing-room?" said Billy; "you ought to have spoken to me first."

"I couldn't prevent it, ma'am," said the maid; "he insisted on coming in."

Billy smiled faintly. The inability of any one to prevent Jerry doing anything seemed highly improbable.

"All right," she said, "you can go. I'll come down presently."

She felt strangely nervous as she went down the stairs a few minutes later. She hadn't seen Jerry since the trial. Then he had not appeared to advantage. Now the boot seemed to be on the other foot. Billy's instinct of liking to look her best was still strong in her.

Jerry was sitting on the extreme edge of one of the

drawing-room chairs. He got up as she entered the room. He was obviously nervous. They stood and looked at each other awkwardly for a few moments—she tall, handsome, and pale; he as insignificant as ever, and red with embarrassment.

Billy recovered herself first.

"Well?" she said.

Jerry cleared his throat; he was very agitated.

"I want you to come back," he said hoarsely.

"You—want—me—to—come back?" repeated Billy, her voice jerky with amazement. "I don't understand."

"To-morrow," said Jerry, "the decree will be made absolute. I don't want it made absolute. I want you to come back."

His voice sounded as if he were repeating something that he had learnt by heart. He probably was.

"Why?" asked Billy. She leant against a chair to steady herself; her brain hadn't yet fully grasped Jerry's request. Jerry began to walk about the room in his old marionette way, talking in little gasps as he did so.

"Because I love you," he said; "yes, I do, Billy, awfully—awfully—I've been utterly miserable over this wretched business—I never wanted to go into court—they made me—Blanche and—and Mrs. D'Arcy—damn them!—but I wanted you all the time—at one time I thought I didn't—and then, when they proved all those things about you, I was sure I didn't—but I did—I did—and—and—I do!"

Jerry sat down, limp with his effort. Billy was about to speak, but he hadn't quite done yet.

"I know you don't love me," he said; "but I

can't help that, I—I love you. Oh, I know I made a nuisance of myself before—bored you to death by always hanging on to you—and all that kind of thing—but I've learnt my lesson—I won't worry you if you come back. I want you, Billy, I really do."

His voice trembled with emotion. The little man was in deadly earnest. To a third party he might have appeared ridiculous, for his tie was awry and he was nervously fidgeting with his gloves. But to Billy he was not ridiculous. His genuine passion touched her; she felt ashamed; there was a nobility in this little husband of hers that had never before been revealed. How could she have ever thought him ridiculous? She felt herself trembling. She wanted to cry—she who despised tears! Well, of late she had had occasion for them. She restrained herself with an inward struggle, forced herself to speak calmly.

"Jerry," she said, "do you understand what you're saying? Do you realize what I am? Those things which they said about me in court—do you believe them?"

"We'll forget all that," said Jerry, "if you'll come back."

"Yes," she persisted, "but do you believe them?"

Jerry fidgeted uneasily.

"Don't let's talk about that," he said.

"But I want to know," she continued.

"Of course I know all that's true," said Jerry, "but still——"

"You want me to come back?"

"Yes."

Something seemed to rise up in Billy's throat and choke her, her eyes swam, tears stood in them and

would not be driven back. This, then, was the love she had despised, the love which demanded no return, nay, which accepted betrayal and forgave it. At that moment Jerry was noble in her eyes, grand, greater than any man she had ever known. She felt she couldn't face him. She walked to the other end of the room, silent and ashamed. When she had recovered herself, she turned to him again.

"It was all false," she said, speaking hurriedly, "all, all. I was never anything to Frank except a friend, and never have been; I wanted to marry him and he wanted to marry me, so I threw up the case. We are still only friends, and shall always be only friends, for he is going to marry some one else. Oh, it was my own doing," she continued, "he has been pressing me to marry him, but I know that he loves some one better than he loves me, and that she loves him."

Billy had been too engrossed with her own recital to notice at first the effect which it had on her husband. When she did so she saw that he had buried his face in his hands. He seemed completely overcome with emotion.

"Oh, Billy," he said chokingly, "if you knew what I've gone through you wouldn't have had the heart to do it. I couldn't believe that you had done what they said you did, and then, when you withdrew your defence——"

"I know," she interrupted brokenly, "I'm heartily ashamed of myself."

She sat down on the sofa. She was feeling very humble at that moment.

Jerry got up and came to her.

"Billy, dear," he said, "can't we begin all over again?"

"You still want me to come back?" she queried.

"Of course I do, more than ever, no, not more than ever, for that would be impossible. I want you, Billy, you, *you*. Things shall be just as you like, just as before."

"No," she said.

He drew back repelled.

"Then you won't?" he began.

She rose from her seat and went to him.

"Yes, I will," she answered, "but not as before."

She drew him to her and kissed him.

"I'm going to be your wife," she said softly.

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